

BLIND MAN'S YEAR

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NO HERO—THIS
SACKCLOTH INTO SILK
TWO IN A TRAIN
THE MAN ON THE WHITE
HORSE
SEVEN MEN CAME BACK
TWO BLACK SHEEP
SMITH
OLD WINE AND NEW
THE ROAD
SHORT STORIES
EXILES
ROPER'S ROW
OLD PYBUS
KITTY
DOOMSDAY
SORRELL AND SON
SUVLA JOHN
THREE ROOMS
THE SECRET SANCTUARY
ORCHARDS
LANTERN LANE
SECOND YOUTH
COUNTESS GLIKA
UNREST

THE PRIDE OF EVE
THE KING BEHIND THE KING
THE HOUSE OF SPIES
SINCERITY
FOX FARM
BESS OF THE WOODS
THE RED SAINT
THE SLANDERERS
THE RETURN OF THE PETTICOAT
A WOMAN'S WAR
VALOUR
BERTRAND OF BRITTANY
UTHER AND IGRAINE
THE HOUSE OF ADVENTURE
THE PROPHETIC MARRIAGE
APPLES OF GOLD
THE LAME ENGLISHMAN
MARRIAGE BY CONQUEST
JOAN OF THE TOWER
MARTIN VALLIANT
THE RUST OF ROME
THE WHITE GATE
THE SEVEN STREAMS
MAD BARBARA
LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

BLIND MAN'S YEAR

By
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I

THE young man stopped to question a labourer who was mending a gap in a hedge.

"Am I right for Knoll Farm?"

The man in the field pointed with his billhook in the direction of a high wood of Scotch firs.

"Up there. First turning on your right."

The young man thanked him and walked on. He carried a rather dirty brown mackintosh slung over his left shoulder, and the face under the grey felt hat was both cheeky and worried. Authority had said to him: "Go down and get an interview with Douglas Gerard. Difficult? I know. It's up to you, my lad. She will never be interviewed or shot, and she's news. Go and get something."

The young man was not feeling happy about this adventure. He had a wife and two children and his position with the *Metropolis* was none too secure. Authority had been terse and sarcastic, and suggesting that editors judged you by the products of your pen. Miss Gerard's pen had been exceedingly productive, and her latest book "A Pilgrimage of Pain" had gone all over the world as a poignant human document whose success had been all the more singular in that it had both captured the masses and pleased the critics. But Miss Gerard was an exceedingly shy and separative person, and her elusiveness made her all the more interesting and mysterious. She had

snubbed the Press and repulsed all camera men, and gossip had become so imaginative that it had begun to hint that Miss Gerard was not woman.

Authority had put it rather coarsely to young Trevor Jones.

"Find out what's under the skirts, my lad."

Sensation! Yes, always and everywhere headlines and a shout.

"Famous Novelist Unveiled." Yet, on this April morning, England was so very lovely that even a young man in search of an income and with a quarter's rent unpaid was moved to other-worldliness. The banks were pied with primroses and wild violets. The gorse was ablaze, the green hillsides brilliant. "Polished plush" thought young Jones, and made a mental note of the phrase. That wood of Scotch firs was like a high masted ship sailing the blue welkin. And then, the young man came to the lane which climbed to this old Sussex farmstead between oak trees with buds of burnished gold. Scattered larches were infinitely green, and so were the young leaves of the thorns.

The lane ascended, curved across a grass field and was suddenly and uncompromisingly occluded by a faded blue gate hung on stone pillars, between high dense hedges of yew. Young Jones stood and stared at the gate. Masses of shrubs and trees hid everything beyond, save one red brick chimney-stack crowned by three red pots. It was impossible to trespass either to right or left, for the hedges were reinforced against such divergings by a close meshed wire fence. Miss Gerard's home was a veritable fortress.

The young man put a hand to the iron ring of the gate latch. The gate was bolted or padlocked on the inside, and the sudden consciousness of being thwarted after a three-mile tramp from Feldhurst village provoked in him qualms of fear and of irritation. Was he to return unprimed to the sarcastic and unsympathetic god in the chair and say: "The gate was locked"? Authority

might reply: "You're not much bloody use to us if you can't gate-crash, my lad."

Editors, like landlords, can preach a harsh determinism, and inspired by the dread of finding himself superfluous in a highly competitive world, the journalist dared to be impudent. Why not climb the gate and defy Miss Gerard's defences? After all, Miss Gerard's annoyance might be less expensive than his editor's scorn. Moreover, was there not copy in the conception of penetrating the mystery of an eccentric woman's seclusion? With a little imagination a highly spiced article might be his. Trevor Jones slung his mackintosh over the gate, pulled himself up and, straddling the gate, paused there for a moment. He saw a gravelled drive disappearing between banks of shrubs, forsythia and ribes in flower, daffodils massed along a turf bank, a flush of peach blossom against a very blue sky. The place was secret and still and steeped in sunshine.

"Well, here goes!" he thought, dropping to earth, and recovering his mackintosh he ventured up the drive. It appeared to have been carefully plotted in a double curve so that the house and garden should remain concealed. Young Jones chose to walk on one of the grass verges, and this stealthiness brought him surreptitiously and abruptly into the presence of two large yew trees, and between them a brick porch.

But there was another presence here, a crisis couchant in the shape of a large Alsatian dozing in the sunlight, his nose between his paws. The journalist hesitated, and the dog's eyes opened. A moment later the young man from London was speeding towards the gate with that rude beast savagely pursuing. Young Jones took a flying leap at the gate. He got his legs over it, but the dog's teeth snapped upon his trailing mackintosh and the thing was left as a sop to Cerberus.

Would that damned dog jump the gate? It could and might, and the scared intruder was about to resume his flight when he heard a voice calling the dog.

"Prince, Prince!"

It was a woman's voice, anxious and vibrant. It seemed to come drifting down between the flowering shrubs to the blue gate where the dog was worrying poor Trevor's mackintosh. "Prince, heel, heel." The young man hesitated. He was moved to react against that shameful, scrambling exit. One might lose a mackintosh and one's dignity, but might not opportunity be here?

Above the sound of the dog's growlings and the rending of material he heard footsteps on the gravel.

"Prince, come here. What have you got?"

The journalist was moved to answer that question.

"He's got my mackintosh."

The dog had turned with a dog's smirk to assure his mistress that he too had a sense of humour. She held him by the collar.

"Who is that?"

Mr. Jones was recovering his courage. He was extracting a card from his pocket-book, and he dropped it over the gate.

"I have come to interview Miss Gerard."

She had picked up his poor mackintosh, but she did not trouble to collect his card.

"Miss Gerard does not grant interviews."

"The editor of *Metropolis*——"

"I think you must have heard what I said."

"But the public is very interested in——"

His mackintosh flew over the gate.

"I'm afraid the dog has torn it. It was very indiscreet of you to trespass. Please assure your editor that Miss Gerard does not appreciate attacks upon her privacy."

"Excuse me, are you Miss Gerard?"

Two hands appeared on the top of the blue gate. He was inexcusably eager to seize this opportunity.

The dog growled.

Said the voice: "Please stay where you are, or I will let the dog loose."

The hands were withdrawn.

"You are not very kind to your admirers, Miss Gerard."

"Too much admiration can be embarrassing."

So it was Miss Gerard on the other side of the gate, and her voice was the voice of a woman. That would dispose of the absurd canard that she was more Douglas than her pseudonym.

"I quite understand," said he, "but couldn't you make an exception?"

"No."

"It really is rather important to me. You see, editors are rather touchy people, and I've got a wife and two kids."

She was stroking the dog's head.

"But don't you realize, Mr.——"

"Trevor Jones."

"Don't you realize that you are obtaining an interview?"

"You mean?"

"How old are the children?"

"Molly's three and Derek one."

"And how long have you been married?"

"Four years. Life's rather a struggle, you know."

Poor young thing! And that ruined mackintosh! Could she offer him money for it?

"I think you are obtaining some quite unusual material, Mr. Jones."

"You mean I may use it?"

"Perhaps."

His face was a shimmer of excitement.

"How splendid of you. May I say that I was chased out of your garden by your dog?"

"Certainly. It will discourage others, will it not?"

"I say, that's marvellous! And that I interviewed you through the gate?"

"Yes."

"Without seeing you?"

"Yes."

"Thanks most awfully, Miss Gerard. It's a real scoop. And would you mind telling me how you came to write "A Pilgrimage of Pain"?"

"It wrote itself. It's the biography of a woman I know."

"A real person?"

"Yes."

The young man had his notebook out and was scribbling in it.

"A human document, what. And is it true, Miss Gerard, that the book has sold nearly a million copies in England and America?"

"I believe so."

"And been translated into every language?"

"With the exception of Russian and, I think, Chinese."

"And what was your reaction, Miss Gerard, over the gigantic success of this book?"

She hesitated.

"Oh, well, it enabled me to put radiators into my house."

His puzzled pencil remained poised.

"Radiators? But——"

"Yes, and buy the land right down to the sea, and plant millions of bulbs. You see, Mr. Jones, I am a very selfish person."

He was gallant.

"I don't accept that, Miss Gerard. I'm sure you must have done——"

"Nothing that has caused me any privation. There is one thing I must insist on."

"Yes."

"You will submit proofs. And you will make your article a warning to others."

"Of course, Miss Gerard. I quite understand."

"I'm so sorry about your mackintosh. Would you allow me to——?"

"On no account, Miss Gerard. This interview is worth

all sorts of things to me. I might almost call it a test case so far as my editor is concerned."

"I am glad. My love to the children, and my coldest compliments to your editor. Good morning, Mr. Jones. I must get back to my gardening."

"Thanks most awfully, Miss Gerard. I will make sure that the proofs are submitted. I do hope you will pass them."

"It's a promise."

"Thank you so much."

Instinctively he raised his hat to the blue gate, and picking up his forlorn mackintosh turned to go.

"My compliments to Prince, Miss Gerard, and tell him I regret that it could not have been my trousers."

"Prince has a nice sense of property, Mr. Jones."

"He has. I'll put that down."

II

With the dog at her heels she walked back to the Sussex farmhouse which she had converted into a secret sanctuary for her soul. Grey stone below, red brick and tile above, its patina softened by the wind and the sun and the rain, its windows looked down two green valleys to the sea. The place was set upon the saddle of a hill, the ridge rising in front of it to a belt of old Scotch firs, and falling again in a green glacis to the cliff edge. The two valleys were full of rolling gorse and sheltered above by oak woods, and from the window of the room in which she wrote her secret self could dwell upon all this loveliness of sea and wood and sky. In her dreaming moods she would call it "Tristan Country," though her Iseult might be but a dim and tragic shape.

A certain sound came to her ears as she reached the corner of the house, a sound that associated itself with the smell of hyacinths, and the yellow flutter of the wings of the Sulphur butterfly. Almost it was a nature sound, a

stridulation of the spring. Her old gardener was cutting the grass. She saw him appear, bending over the handles of the machine, his very blue eyes set in an absorbed stare. His face and neck were like creased leather, his Saxon mustachios grizzled. On his head he wore an old grey cloth cap that was eternally incongruous. To her historic sense it should have been a helmet.

The blades ceased from whirring. The grass-box was full, and as he unhitched it to empty the contents into a barrow he became aware of her presence.

"Heavy going, Will."

Always she was conscious of the extraordinary straightness of his glance. He looked at her as a dog might look, not seeming to see that which she shrank from showing to the world.

"Plenty o' bottom to it, miss."

He was sixty-seven and she had offered him a motor-mower, and he had scorned it. Foreign, new fangled things!

"I suppose it is not quite safe yet to put out the Blue Lilies?"

No, it wasn't safe. Frosts in May. Besides, why be in a hurry? Your country man learns to wait upon the whims of Nature.

"I hope Mary's toothache is better?"

"I made she poultice it. Bust in the night, it did."

"We must send her to see a dentist."

Will did not altogether hold with dentists. When he had been afflicted with an aching tooth he had suffered the darned thing grimly, or dealt with it, if the tooth was at all loose, with ruthless finger and thumb.

She too worked with her hands, for such labour had become part of her philosophy. To be all head was not wholesome, and though she had the world of her imagination to wander in, the world outside her windows insisted on being lived in. She had set herself to create beauty, without believing that it was possible to lose yourself in impersonal things. You just made your choice without

craving the crowd's illusion of happiness. What was happiness? She had days of beautiful serenity, and days of sadness when some unsatisfied urge troubled her like the swell of the sea. Why this restlessness? And if you set out to interpret life, to be the medium of humanity's moods, it behoved you not to be too happy. No one would describe the violin as an instrument of crude, trumpeting complacency.

When Mr. Trevor Jones's intrusion had interrupted her she had been scuffling the caked soil of the herbaceous borders with a Dutch hoe. The oblong space in front of the farmhouse had, with its low stone wall, persuaded her to plan a beautiful formality, grass and stone, lead figures, a pool, flanking hedges of yew, and broad borders under the wall for a coloured setting. Two formal beds were a blaze of tulips, wallflower, polyanthus, red daisies and myosotis. She liked her colours rich and varied. The big borders were full of Darwin and May flowering tulips, and she had had to work carefully and deliberately so as not to injure them with her hoe.

But those few moments of contact with the outer world had altered the morning's rhythm for her. An anxious young man, a wife, children, the scramble to survive, the strange game of collecting what was known as news! Picking sensation like rank herbs to spice the stew of other people's dull lives! She felt that she wanted to go and look at the sea, and leaving the hoe standing in the soil, and followed by the dog, she took the paved path to the iron gate in the stone wall. It was a beautiful gate, if a reproduction, of Italian work, and through its scrolls she saw the green hillside rising to the sailing firs.

Will had pushed his cap back and was watching her before giving the mower's bearings a dose of oil. Will's brain was not all turnip and winter-wash. A man who has watched the ways of Nature for fifty years is no fool, though the mass-product mind might think him an old oaf in corduroys. Will was saying to himself as he had said before; "Well, be'n't that queer, that one side of her

face should be like a white rose, and t'other blotched the colour o' beetroot! Nature made a mess o' that, I reckon. And she not much more than five and thirty!" That there could be bitterness in such a blemish was well within Will's understanding. Didn't he know that if a woman lost a front tooth, or had a spot on her forehead, she was shy of being stared at? Thin-skinned creatures, women. Miss Gerard had been born with that port-wine mark on the left side of her face, like a splodge of purple paint laid on flat, and the doctors had not been able to do anything about it.

Will squirted oil into the machine's bearings.

"Look at her one side and she's a pretty woman; look at her t'other——! Nature do play tricks on we mortals."

The patched seat of his trousers was turned to the windows when a voice hailed him.

"Will?"

"Hallo."

"Where is she?"

"Gone up to t'fir wood with t'dog."

The face of Jane saluted the sunlight. A plain, kind, crumpled face, it had made her just Jane to all humanity. She had hairs on her chin and brown eyes that are somehow doomed to devotion, be the object of it a cat or her kitchen range.

"I wanted to ask her if she'd remembered about something."

Will was again in action with the mower. If women liked to be vague, that was their business, not his.

"Well, if you've both forgot, I can't help 'ee."

Which was obvious, as obvious as the patch on William's rump, and Jane, knowing her Will, left it at that.

Meanwhile, Rosamund Gerard had climbed the green hill to the grove of firs, and from this high place she could look out over Sussex and the sea, and on this April day the spring woods were spun silk and the sea almost the sea of Greece. Leaning against one of the trees and looking up along its tall straight trunk, she could detect no

movement of the green top. This stillness should have soothed her. Was not this little world all hers, with its burning gorse and burgeoning oaks, and that orchard in bloom beside Will Spray's cottage? Sea and sky and woods were hers, peace, security, the right to be utterly herself, and yet this ultimate restlessness pursued her.

Had she not made her choice? Had not this lonely life given her powers of self-expression, just because of the foolishly simple things that were denied her? The unshed tears of her loneliness! And then, feeling the dog's cold nose touching her hand, she looked down, met his asking eyes and understood him.

"Run, Prince."

Something broke loose in her. She ran like a long-legged girl down the grass slope to the cliff's edge, with the dog bounding beside her. She stood poised on a shelf of grey rock, her hands clasped behind her head, her eyes catching the sparkle of the sea. It lay far below, making wet murmurings against the rocks, and between her and the sea a great cliff smothered itself in scrub oak, wind-blown thorns, bracken and ivy. She swayed a little in a kind of ecstasy. How easy it would be to throw oneself down!

The dog's nose touched her hand again, and she remembered, and suddenly bending she kissed his head.

"One must suffer in order to be able to say things, my dear."

And turning back she reclinced the grass slope to the grove of firs, and sitting down among the trees sat brooding with the dog's head in her lap.

LAUNCELOT GERARD and his wife had been dead for many years, and ever since she could remember their youngest daughter had been trying to forgive her parents for that birth-mark, and her Christian name. Rosamund, Rose of the World! How ironical!

There had been no sons in the Gerard family, and she had been the last of three daughters, and always she had had the feeling that her father had regarded her disfigurement as a personal affront. She remembered him vividly for his vanity and his Mincing Lane manners, for his love of display, and the perfect creasing of his trousers. As a child she had thought of him as possessing tin legs, and eyes that had regarded her as though kindness was, like his trousers, a very artificial product. He had left her ten thousand pounds on trust in Government stock, and the echoes of a conversation she had overheard: "It is one's duty to provide for Rosamund. The inevitable spinster, my dear sir. But one must take steps to insure that no cad will ever make a fool of her for her money."

Her memories of her mother were more happy, but Irene Gerard had died during Rosamund's first year at school—that dreadful school where her secret soul had suffered so many repressions and so much humiliation. Life had not allowed her to become unaware of her disfigurement. She could remember appealing to her father: "Must I go back to school?" and he, absorbed in the excitements of a middle-aged man's pursuit of a second marriage, had been irritated by her emotional sensitiveness. He had stood up and harangued her. Of course she must go back to school. She must learn to outgrow this absurd self-consciousness. She must try and forget

that discoloration of her skin, which, after all, was not so obvious as she imagined, and she had gone back to school feeling bitter and frightened, to find there the one friend to whom her disfigurement was not a stigma.

"Why didn't it come in the middle of my back, Margaret?"

"For other reasons, perhaps. The beauty inside you."

It was Margaret Hayle who had helped her through those school years, beautiful Margaret, with her deep brown eyes and her serene forehead. She had never been jealous of Margaret or grudged her her beauty, for Margaret was lovely within as well as without, and to her over-sensitive friend she had uncovered a mystical mirror.

"Make your own world, Rose."

It was Margaret who had helped her to make it: Margaret the fastidious feminist, who, launched on her own career as a healer, had taken Rosamund into her little London flat and given her that precious, personal room where she could scribble. Margaret an M.D. London! How strange life was! Margaret doctoring other peoples' babies, and not caring, apparently, to possess one of her own. And Margaret was still with her, both in the spirit and the flesh. She would drive down to the Sussex farm for occasional week-ends, and Rosamund would let loose a tongue and a soul that had been damned up through weeks of silence. Margaret remained her one live link with the outer world, the one live person who understood her.

But in other ways the outer world was intimately hers. She, the most uncommercial of creatures, had found her public pouring wealth into her lap, and sometimes she would smile and think of her father. She, the family failure, the inevitable spinster, was to be pensioned off, and she could suppose that the income she enjoyed from a world sale of her books was ten times that which her father had earned. How his mouth would have watered! What dinners he would have given had he been the

recipient of such an income, how sumptuous would have been his triumphal chariot, and what Piccadilly adventures he would have purchased. Eros in tinplate trousers! Money. It had given her this beautiful retreat and an ironical consciousness of power, and a sense of compassion that was responsible.

People wrote to her for money, and for other things, and being human and somewhat lonely she preferred those who wrote to her for other things. Her correspondence, seriously accepted, filled two hours of her day. Wives wrote to her about their husbands and their sons, daughters about their lovers and their parents, worried women about their struggles and their fears. She, who was so profoundly understanding in her books, was made to listen to the confessions of her public. She was a kind of literary priestess and seer.

She had three gallant old ladies who were part pensioners upon her bounty. She intervened many times a year to turn the bitter edge of some desperate domestic crisis. She did nothing sentimentally or blindly. She employed a confidential agent, recommended by her London lawyers, to investigate tactfully the appeals that reached her. He had saved her from hundreds of ingenious spongers. She gave Margaret Hayle £100 a year to help send her convalescent children into the country. Nor did she congratulate herself on her charitable condescension. It was just a giving back to humanity something of what humanity gave to her. When she was feeling in a difficult mood and was tempted by self-pity, she re-read some of the letters that other women had written her.

Then there were her sisters, Norah and Phoebe. Yes, Norah and Phoebe! Both were married, both had families and ambitions and delicate bank balances, and both were of the opinion that a successful, odd, and unattached sister was a person to be exploited. Aunt Rosamund was rich. Absurd, but it was so. Rosamund had duties to perform. Rosamund was obviously the family wet-nurse and social godmother. Rosamund

could write a cheque whenever bank balances were wilting. Her sisters could not ask her to come and nurse their children or mind their houses when they went for holidays, or take John or Dulcie when the other children had whooping-cough. Rosamund was too eccentric and too wealthy to be exploited like the Victorian unmarried aunt, but she was expected to understand that blood was thicker than water.

"What can she do with all her money?"

Miss Gerard disliked both her sisters with equal sincerity, and she kept them at a distance. Norah with her cold blue stare and hard-boiled egg of a chin, was married to a doctor who practised in a north-country town, and so was not too near a neighbour. Norah had evolved subtle methods of compulsion. She had concentrated that blue stare on the disfigured side of her younger sister's face. People should pay for their blemishes.

Phœbe was florid and fat and voluble, and as full of Phœbe as a ripe peach is full of juice. She had three children and a golfing husband, and a house at Oxshott in Surrey. Phœbe was inconveniently near. It had been very much her custom to crash down upon Rosamund in a voluble little car. Phœbe drove as she lived, with a delightfully jocund and florid disregard of other people's necessities. All the road was Phœbe's, but upon one of her speedings she had killed a cyclist, and with such characteristic indiscretion that her licence had been withdrawn for three years. Hence Phœbe was not quite so mobile and so prevalent.

Jane knocked gently at her mistress's door. Between the hours of eight-thirty a.m. and eleven Miss Gerard was not to be disturbed. This making of books might seem to Jane to be a mysterious business, but it fed the cat and paid Will's wages, and made life comfortable for an elderly woman whose philosophy was that of staying put.

"Sorry, miss. Telegram."

Miss Gerard rose from her chair. Her writing-desk

stood in the window of an upper room, and from it she could look down the twin valleys to the sea.

"So sorry, miss. The boy came to Will's gate."

"I was only writing letters, Jane."

Miss Gerard opened and read the telegram.

"My dear, must see you. Expect me lunch. Phœbe."

Jane, waiting with the silver salver held naïvely against her tummy, watched Miss Gerard's face. It was a very sensitive face, and it had a trick of fluttering its lashes when it was troubled or worried.

"Mrs. Prodgers, Jane. Lunch. Can you manage?"

"Yes, miss. Will there be a chauffeur?"

"If there is, he can go to Feldhurst."

She was not feeling friendly towards her second sister. She was wise as to Phœbe's "Oh, my dear." Such exclamatory preludes promised exploitation. And somewhere in Sussex Phœbe was explaining to an idle young man whose car and person she had borrowed, the ridiculous sensitiveness of her sister.

"I don't think I can get you in, Archie."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, she's not quite normal. One half of her face is all right, the other all nævus."

"What's that?"

"A port-wine mark, my dear. Born with it. Norah always says that nævus and genius must be synonymous."

"How woozy! Won't she see people?"

"No. Keeps a large Alsatian. And you'd frighten her to death, or the dog might bite you."

He was a very stupid but good-looking young man, save that his lower lip was too pendulous.

"What do I do?"

"Better drive down to Westbourn and lunch yourself. I've got the tea-basket, and we'll do a little picnic in Ashdown Forest going home."

The young man shot his lower lip at her.

Phœbe Prodgers had a provincial mind and her father's vanity, minus his Mincing Lane manners. People who liked her called her a good sort, though in what her goodness lay was not easy to define. She displayed her virtues, like her clothes, played a selfish and noisy hand at bridge, quarrelled with the tradespeople, left her bills unpaid for months on end, and said frankly that she knew just how to manage her husband and her children, though the success of the delicate manipulations was not very patent to the world. Her children were rowdy little exhibitionists; Tom Prodgers so little under her control that he ran away from her whenever he could find an excuse for doing it. Indeed, she belonged to a Victorian, Champagne Charlie period, and might have functioned as the typically flavicomous Victorian barmaid confronting a cad's world with full bosom and flowery face, and a candour like unrefined sugar.

Miss Gerard heard the car climbing the steep lane. It was not a car that concealed its coming, nor was Phœbe's young man of the order of quietists. Miss Gerard, in a playful moment, had described him and his likes as "bowler-hatted bounders of the baser sort." The dog had been shut up in the kitchen and, accepting the inevitableness of Phœbe, Miss Gerard walked down to the gate. It was padlocked, and she had the key.

Conversation was in progress beyond the barrier.

"I say, does she keep that locked?"

"Yes, my dear."

"What a wooze! Then, I shall have to back all the way down this lane."

"You will."

"What time shall I come and pick you up?"

"About three. I expect we shall have bored each other sufficiently by then."

"Righto."

He proceeded to reverse the car down the lane, and Phœbe Prodgers stood outside the blue gate with a smile ready to break through her very natural sense of irritation.

She understood the absurd ritual of the place. Her sister provided no means of communication. You either waited for the agreed moment to arrive, or you shouted until that old crab of a gardener heard you. What a place, what a life! And then, one leaf of the gate swung open unexpectedly, for the mechanical clamour of the small car had smothered the sound of Miss Gerard's footsteps.

The Phœbe smile was turned on like artificial sunlight.

"Oh, my dear, I simply couldn't give you longer notice."

She would have kissed Rosamund carefully on her undiscolored cheek had not Miss Gerard long ago made it evident by a certain flinching coldness that she did not wish to be saluted. Phœbe might boast of her robust and affectionate frankness, but nothing was more transparent than her attempts to conceal ulterior motives. She could be so like a child on its best behaviour, trying not to look too patently at the cake dish.

"Have you sent your chauffeur away?"

It was important that Rosamund should not assume that Prodders and Co. could afford a chauffeur.

"Oh, it's only young Archie Sugden. Such a nice lad. He had to come and see an aunt at Westbourn and he drove me down. Oh, my dear, isn't the garden lovely!"

They were in the drive, and the garden as a garden was not yet visible, but Phœbe, when once she had chosen her record and got it started had to let it run. Why did women like Phœbe always lie, even when the plain issue needed no embroidery?

"I'm afraid there is only cold lunch."

"Oh, just anything will do for me, my dear. I never mind what I eat. Isn't Sussex just marvellous on a day like this? And how's dear Jane?"

Miss Gerard was trying not to be rendered inarticulate by her sister, for Phœbe had that effect upon her, of making her close every secret window and sit in a kind of cold fug of ruthless cynicism.

"Jane's just Jane."

"And where's the dear dog? You don't mean to say you have shut him up? He's such a darling. Oh, I simply must tell you what Rex said the other day. Rex is just five, you know, and of all the little bits of mischief—— We were giving a bridge party, and he came in to say good night. And what do you think he asked Tom?"

Miss Gerard, perhaps with some inward waywardness, kept her disfigured cheek towards her sister.

"What did he ask Tom?"

"'Daddy, what is a har-lot?'"

Miss Gerard smiled faintly.

"And did Tom tell him?"

"My dear, how could he? My partner got giggles and we missed a grand slam. Oh, but the garden! It's simply a picture. I really want to look at it. You must have spent a fortune on bulbs. But then you can afford it. Simply marvellous, just by writing books. I can't think how you do it."

Miss Gerard was wondering just when the basic inspiration of Phœbe's visit would begin to display itself. Her sister's diplomacy was very much that of carnal woman. "Give a man a drink before you tell him the kitchen boiler's worn out." In all probability Phœbe would begin her pathetic story after lunch over coffee and a cigarette. And what would the particular plea prove to be on this occasion? Had Tom had to pay one of his many indigent sisters' nursing-home and doctor's bills, or had the family car suffered more damage, or the moment arrived when the whole interior of "The Cedars" had to be redecorated? "Oh, my dear, business, you know, is awful." Or had Phœbe been buying too many new clothes, and had Tom exploded?

Phœbe drank half a bottle of white wine for lunch and, as Miss Gerard had expected, her sister warmed to the crisis over her coffee. She had been telling Miss Gerard how she had overheard someone at a dinner enthusing

over Rosamund's latest book. "It really did make me feel proud, you know, to be able to say 'That's my sister.'" Miss Gerard sat on the sofa with her back to the light and supposed that the dénouement must be very near. It was, but its appearance was prepared by a description of how bad things were in the City, and how worried Tom was about the future, and the children's education. Almost Tom was proposing to give up golf.

"Of course, my dear, I oughtn't to worry you with our affairs, but it does seem rather hard that when you are trying to be bright and busy people should let you down. Really, people do such dreadful things."

And what was the dreadful thing that people had done to the Prodgers? Phœbe explained.

"Oh, Tom backed a bill or something for a friend in the City. Supposed to be quite a decent person and all that. Would you believe me, but Tom has been let in. It's only for two hundred pounds, but Tom had just paid his insurance premium and it makes it dreadfully awkward."

Miss Gerard made a most unsympathetic suggestion.

"Can't Tom go to his bank?"

"Of course, my dear, but they would charge him eight per cent., and then it isn't quite nice for a business man to go and cadge. Things get about so. And you know, my dear, it's so important to appear prosperous. People talk. It's really dreadful how men gossip in the train, and of course that sort of thing isn't good for business. Social position, prestige, do matter. People are such snobs."

Miss Gerard felt that the predestined moment had arrived, and she was wishing to get it over.

"Tom wants to borrow money without it being known?"

"Exactly. How quick of you to understand. Tom has written out a post-dated cheque. He wondered whether you could see your way to advance him something

on it? Of course, it's only a loan for three months and Tom wishes to pay interest."

Phœbe's fingers were busy in her bag. A cigarette drooped from one corner of her mouth. Miss Gerard held out a hand.

"There you are, my dear. I do hate worrying relations, but, after all, there are occasions."

Miss Gerard scanned the cheque.

"Five hundred pounds! I thought you said two hundred?"

"Did I? Two, yes, but one must have a margin."

Miss Gerard laid the cheque on the sofa and appeared to reflect.

"Phœbe."

"Yes, dear?"

"Supposing I haven't five hundred pounds to my credit?"

She was aware of her sister's sudden suspicious stare.

"Oh, then, of course, you couldn't. But, perhaps three hundred?"

"Phœbe, I happen to have all kinds of commitments that you do not know of. No, I won't specify them in detail. Has Tom any security to offer me?"

"Security?"

"Yes, collateral, stocks or bonds. You see, if I am to act as a banker, this should be a business transaction."

"But you have that cheque."

"Just a promise to pay."

"My dear, do you mean to suggest——?"

But Miss Gerard had decided that it was time to suppress too much sensitiveness. There had been too many occasions when she had assisted her sister, and the thing was becoming a habit.

"Tom is a business man, and I prefer this to be a business transaction. If your husband will deposit the proper securities with me I will make the advance against them."

She folded up the cheque and, returning it to her sister, watched Phœbe's fat fingers thrusting it back into the bag. It was obvious to her that Phœbe was feeling hot and insulted.

"Yes, *I'll have to tell Tom that you don't trust him.*"

"I should not tell him that, Phœbe. Explain that I should like him to approach me as he would approach another business man."

"I'm afraid Tom will be so hurt."

"Why?"

"Oh, you don't understand. You're so—so well off and safe. I'm sorry I ever mentioned the matter."

Miss Gerard glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. The hands stood at five minutes to three.

"I think Tom will understand, Phœbe. As a business man he may prefer me to be businesslike."

Her sister also had glanced at the clock.

"The car must be there. No, please don't bother to come to the gate."

Miss Gerard did not propose to go to the gate.

"Get Tom to write to me."

"I'm quite sure he will do nothing of the kind. After all, we're not spongers."

Miss Gerard did not argue the point, but she had a conviction that had she been able to listen in to "The Cedar's" conversation that evening she would have heard hard things said about herself. Which was true.

"It's a damned insult! Chucking my cheque back at me!"

"All right, all right, I did my best. Rosamund always was funny. It's her face, of course, and it has made her more so. And living all alone like that. People without children and that sort of thing always get mean. It's really horrible that money should make one so suspicious."

II

The blurtings of the vulgar, like the sayings of little children, may bruise the skin of some secretly cherished sin, and Miss Gerard could apply all the Prodgers' adjectives to her own separative soul. Mean, selfish, suspicious. Was the accusation true? Yes, in a sense it was, even as she could have been accused of possessing a heart, liver, kidneys. She had chosen to live this separative life, to inhabit a secret world in which she shared the lives of the creatures she created. She had walked up to the pinewood after her sister's departure, and let herself slip into one of those analytical and self-accusing moods that afflict those who are too sensitive. Sackcloth rubbing against silk! There would be no submergence of self in creative dreaming. Phoebe had left her feeling raw and elemental and restless.

All this loveliness of sea and landscape and of sky! Was she selfish in desiring to possess it and her soul in peace? Did she desire it and nothing else? Oh, intimate, inevitable flinchings of the flesh! She, too, had to contend with and suppress those elemental qualms and yearnings. It was so easy for a separative person to become—what was the word?—Funny? That, no doubt, was the word her relations used, and even in its vulgar implications it was adequate. Funny, faddy, abnormal. She was so wise as to her own hypersensitive reactions. She was quite absurdly intolerant of noise, the many mechanical noises of the modern world. She detested aeroplanes. A plane overhead made her feel almost like a bird crouching in a hedge with a kestrel poised up above. She had bought Knoll Farm because it did not lie near any of the new arteries of noise, in the air or on the earth. Her very work insisted upon silence, and even old Will had been educated into refraining from activities under her window when she worked.

"Am I growing funny?"

The firs were talking softly to each other, but such nature sounds never disturbed her. She loved them. No wind could be too strong, no seas too thunderous. But had she not seen something in the eyes of Margaret, a kind of physician's look, deep, penetrating, troubled? Hyperæsthesia of the soul! Margaret has teased her gently.

"I believe you have only half a skin. Oh, yes, I know. If you lived next door to a school playground——"

She could laugh at herself with Margaret.

"Would you call it neurasthenia?"

"No, my dear."

"Or the selfishness of the hypersensitive?"

"I might. I'm going to be puckish, and prescribe one small child hammering a tea-tray under your window."

"But it wouldn't be my child."

"Why not consider it as a universal?"

She had smiled at Margaret.

"None of your symbolism. As if one did not know when one was being naughty! One does, and goes on being naughty. One even discovers a sort of pleasure in it."

"Spiting the Nanny in yourself! Aren't we strange creatures? Just because someone else in you says 'Don't'."

"You're so impartial, my dear. Tell me, do you see signs of incipient reclusomania?"

"I wish you would bother a little more about your clothes."

"My dear, to what purpose?"

"We moderns rather regard it as a sign of health."

"Physical and mental?"

"Both."

She let her head rest against the trunk of the tree, and looking up at its green branches she supposed that Margaret was right. She had no personal vanity, nor had Margaret for that matter, for Margaret's loveliness was

so complete that she had no more need to be self-conscious about it than this stately tree. Though Margaret would have said that no beauty can transcend clothes, and that the skin and texture of life should be part of the ritual of a fastidious self-regard. But clothes? How could clothes concern a woman who lived the life of a recluse? She had done with mirrors, for mirrors had tortured her as a child. Did her dog care how she dressed? Was old Will Spray Molyneux minded?

She shopped by post, though once or twice a year she did permit Messrs. Timmer and Morse's of Westbourn to send a representative to call on her with a selection of frocks. Flowery fabrics and silks appealed to her because of their beauty, and she would buy a dress and perhaps wear it once or twice before hanging it in a kind of Bluebeard cupboard among other discarded frocks. Often she passed them on to Margaret for her adaptation and use, or for distribution elsewhere. Apparently it had not occurred to her that you might dress to your garden if you loved it, and keep the flowers in countenance.

Yes, undoubtedly she was growing more and more separative and eccentric, and shy of all contacts with the outer world. Mr. Biederman of Messrs. Hacking and Squires, her publishers, came down to see her twice a year. She liked Mr. Biederman. He was large and restful and matronly, a man with a lap. His big blond face would have fitted admirably into a lilac sunbonnet.

Did this monastic life matter? She might qualify the no by saying that it concerned no one but Miss Gerard. She assured herself that she did not ask to be happy. She could sublimate all elemental urges into creative dreaming and give them expression in her work.

There was one question she had not asked herself. It had fluttered in at her window like a moth in the dusk of some lonely mood, and wilfully she had ignored it, perhaps because it had made her afraid. But both Margaret

Hayle and Mr. Biederman had had that same question unuttered on their lips. Was it possible for a creative mind to continue to be creative while withdrawing itself from all human contacts? And even if it survived, might not its flowering be odd and unsymmetrical and bizarre, a little *macabre*? But who could say? Genius inhabits strange places, and its twilights and its dawns may belong to a world of other dimensions.

III

A STILL, serene and golden day.

She liked to wake early in such weather, dress and steal downstairs into the farmhouse kitchen to put a match to Jane's meticulously clean and odourless oil stove, and while the kettle was boiling for her early tea she would go into the garden. It was so much more beautiful in the slanting, early light, with dew on the grass, a little world possessed in secret by herself and the birds. At such a time she would be conscious of a thinning of the sensuous veil. The green and flowery bosom of the earth was but a garment, the trees strange shapes in the mirror of mysticism.

She was out early on this morning in April. There was a haze over the sea, and wisps of vapour trailing from the Scotch firs. The sun and the mist were weaving fantastic patterns, covering hillsides and woods in grey tissue and then snatching it aside. One valley was in the sunlight, the other blind, and even as she watched the sea-wrack changed its drift. A billow of mist came pouring over the garden, not a complete wave, but a great white scroll broken into vapoury patches and fringes of fog. She could see clumps of daffodil brilliantly yellow in the young grass, and suddenly they were turned to silver. The cold mist played upon her face. It was as though some world was taking shape within this primordial cloud of vapour, flashing and disappearing, becoming and glowing, veiled in the gradualness of its lovely reality, a beginning of things beneath the beneficent and unseen face of a God.

Was not her own creative craft somewhat like this,

mist, vagueness, and then the penetrating light of inspiration, something to be marvelled at and exulted over? The white page was like that sheet of fog. She would sit and gaze at it, and then her pen would begin to move and her world of words would take shape in a subtle pattern of shades and sounds and colours, for to her words had colour. This would be a morning upon which things poured from you, and returning to the kitchen she made her tea and carried it up to her working-room.

She sat down at her desk by the window. Yesterday she had been groping amid the implications of a complex situation. She had lost sight of her people, but to-day she felt that she would see them clearly. She had to see them and listen to them to know them and express them. She drank her tea, and lighting a cigarette picked up her pen.

Immediately she became conscious of a sound, a melancholy complaining like that of some vast animal in pain. Had it been there before without her being aware of it, and had the added tension of her creative mood made her conscious of it? The siren of the Long Shoal Lightship! Fog at sea, and that great grey bleating sea-cow calling for its calf. Always this particular sound had a peculiar and unpleasant effect upon her. It was like the voice of some primordial creature in pain, calling to the deep sea and the sky. Something in her answered it, that unsatisfied, secret, human self which she suppressed and kept like some blind creature in a cave. And sometimes she was conscious of its struggles and complainings.

The fog was thickening. Wisps of it floated in at her window.

The siren's voice died away. How absurd of her to be affected by a mechanical cow! She willed herself to write. She was very conscious of the fountain pen as a black, hard object between thumb and forefinger. She scribbled a few words, and paused, confronted by yet

another distraction. The pen was running dry; it needed refilling.

She was conscious of saying "Damn you." She opened a drawer on her left where the bottle of ink lived with brass clips, rubber bands, envelopes, sealing-wax. She refilled the pen, but dipping it too deeply into the inkpot she found ink upon her thumb and finger. Blotting paper. She closed the drawer, and with a sense of inward stress sat squarely to recover her concentration. The sheet of paper was like an unfriendly face.

An inward voice said "Relax." She tried to let the tension melt from her mood. Again that melancholy wailing. The sound might have been just outside her window. She set herself to ignore it, only to be distracted by yet another sound, the distant howling of a dog.

Prince! She remembered that Prince was affected almost as she was by this mournful noise. But he gave tongue; he protested. Prince passed the night in a kind of super-kennel in what had been the farmyard, a chained sentinel whose duty it was to rouse old Will should any strange sound suggest trespass. The dog was chained, because Miss Gerard had found that Prince's peregrinations could be disastrous in the garden. He could leap gates, and would come and whimper under her window. Originally she had allowed the dog to share her bedroom, but he had shown such a determined desire to share the bed with her that she had been compelled to banish him. Prince's size and weight and affection were not conducive to tranquil sleep.

She surrendered. She could not be held responsible for the lightship's bellowings, and had she been able to silence them men and ships might have suffered disaster, but for the dog she was responsible. She went down and into the farmyard which had been converted into a paved court with a sunk lily pool in the centre. The old red brick buildings had been faced with treillage over which

glycine and vines and clematis scrambled, and in this courtyard she had collected statues, an Italian well-head, vases, a Charles II lead cistern, the busts of Roman emperors upon freestone pillars. Marcus Aurelius, that stoic soul, wore on his head a gilded wreath and the blessings of perching robins.

The dog saw her, and standing rampant with the chain taut between kennel and collar made welcoming noises.

"You scoundrel, Prince. You and the lightship ruined my inspiration."

She went to let him off the chain, but he put his forepaws on her shoulder and licked her face, her poor undesired, blemished face.

"My dear, it doesn't matter to you."

She felt grateful to this creature, responsible for him. Prince, too, was a celibate, living a separative life, yet craving his share of affection. She slipped the catch of the chain, and he went bounding round the courtyard as though challenging her to share the joy of life. Barbarous things, chains.

"All right, my dear, we'll go and look at the sea."

But looking at sea was a mere figure of speech. She could distinguish nothing but a great white sheet hanging above the dewy turf and the dim gorse bushes. It was not easy to tell where the hillside ended and the cliff began, and out of that mysterious, genetic haze came the sighings of the lightship.

"O woman, and those who sail the sea, beware! I suffer that you may be saved."

The dog was standing close beside her, staring into the fog as though he too divined in it the sinister inception of things unseen.

II

The blindness of the day continued, and so did Miss Gerard's own sightless mood. She did not go up to her working room after breakfast, but sat reading Gibson and Harper's "Riddle of Jutland," great ships groping for each other in the fog at sea. And perhaps it piqued her to read of the crowd's illusions, and of the officious strutting of Fleet Street, and the re-elevation of that quiet little man, Genius Unplacarded. Jellicoe and Jutland, newspaper magnates with swollen heads, fog, jealousies, ungenerous gossip, and then, in such a book as this the sun coming out and the truth floating upon the waters.

Sunlight. She looked out of the window and saw the garden suddenly alive. The firs were green upon their hill. Old Will had said that the day might clear about eleven, but that he would not promise her what the afternoon might be. Should she go out and garden, or paint the garden frame that was waiting for her in the Knoll Farm workshop? No, she was not quite in the mood for work with either head or hands; she would take the dog out along the cliff track towards Beacon Hill.

She went. The sun was shining on the gorse, but over yonder a veil of vapour hung down to shroud the sea. The cliff path was the one solitary walk she could enjoy, for she was absurdly sensitive about meeting people, and would turn aside and disappear amid the gorse bushes to avoid the most casual contact. Even the dog had picked up her unsocial prejudices and would growl at any stranger, and fix them with fierce, amber eyes. She had to snap the leash to his collar if any human figure hove in sight.

She saw no one that morning but a farmer's son out with a gun, and the lad was so absorbed in his own affairs that he did not notice her, nor did Prince challenge

him. She climbed Beacon Hill and saw Sussex and its coast hazed in momentary sunlight, but already the fog was beginning to advance again from the sea. There was a faint drift of cold air from the east. She returned, feeling soothed and far less restless, to one of Jane's omelette and rhubarb tart lunches. It had been one of Mary Spray's mornings in the house, and on such occasions Jane was apt to be heavy handed with the sugar.

Miss Gerard liked a long chair in the garden after lunch, half an hour's reading, half an hour's sleep, and then more work with hands or head. It was always possible for her to find a sheltered, draughtless spot under the stone wall or behind the banks of shrubs. To-day she arranged her chair and garden mattress and cushions in the little loggia she had had built. A glass screen sheltered it from the east, and here, on this April day, she drew the rug over her and felt at peace.

She read, she slept, to wake shortly after three to the sound of the lightship's complaining. The sea-wrack was drifting in again, and though the garden lay in the thin sunlight the firs on the hill stood like tall ships befogged. It occurred to her that if she climbed the hill she would be able to watch this game of hide and seek between the sea spirit and the land, and leaving her rug and cushions in a tangle, she went out by way of the gate in the stone wall. Half-way up the hillside she became involved in the drifting mist, and felt its cold breath upon her face.

She reached the trees, and stood there watching the landscape being blotted out. Soon she might have been in the middle of a cloud, and twenty yards away the trunks of the firs were scarcely visible. She was on the point of turning to retrace her steps when an unexpected sound came to her from over the sea.

An aeroplane, her particular blatant beast, but in listening to the drone of the machine's engine she found herself realizing what this fog might mean to the man in

the air. Moreover, the sound seemed peculiarly near and not coming from above. She would have said that the sound was travelling to her almost on the level of the trees. She had read of befogged airmen flying blindly into a hillside.

The sound came nearer. She was conscious of a peculiar and intuitive spasm of suspense. The thing must be very low, terribly and dangerously low. Almost she could feel the mist vibrating to that sound. It began to frighten her, rushing nearer like some winged and unseen menace. It seemed to be flying straight towards the trees with a swift and swelling sense of some impending horror. Her impulse was to crouch, but she just stood helplessly and stared into the fog, waiting to see the great shape come sweeping down or over.

A sudden impact, a crash! She felt the actual tremor of the earth. Even the trees seemed to quiver in the fog. She stood for a moment in shocked stillness. Some object whirled and struck one of the firs, and fell to earth close to her. She was conscious of a strange horror, and her impulse was to fly from it. She was half-way down the hillside and running towards the house when scorn of her own crass cowardice seemed to catch at her throat.

She paused, turned about, and with strange pantings reclimbed the hill.

"You miserable funk!"

Some inner voice seemed to be speaking to her as she passed again between the dim trunks of the trees. It was telling her with merciless ferocity that all her life had been cowardice, a shirking of all stark, human issues. She was conscious of replying passionately and yet piteously to that ruthless voice: "Be quiet, be quiet. Oh yes, I know." The fog and a kind of anguish of self-revelment were sufficient for the moment. Where exactly had the aeroplane crashed? Where in this ghost world would she come upon the wreckage?

Her impression was that the machine had struck the ground somewhat below and to the left of the group of firs, and moving in that direction she came suddenly upon four oak trees which stood together with their branches interlocked. The aeroplane had crashed through the tops of these trees like a wasp into a spider's web, leaving the torn trees a tangle of wreckage. The machine had come to earth beyond the oaks, and she saw its wings dimly through the mist, like the great spread arms of a man lying prone. The ground was a litter of strange wreckage, but the thing that shocked her most vividly was the silence and the stillness of that fallen air bird. No movement, no sound, nothing but the drifting fog. She had ceased to be a creature of hypersensitive shirkings. She had read of smashed planes catching fire, and of the horror of such a human holocaust. She must look, help. The body of the machine discovered itself to her as a tangle of nameless wreckage, but it had a shape. She saw something human there, an arm hanging down, a head in a leather helmet, a face that was all blood. She was conscious of forcing her way through the horror of these crowded impressions. She must get that figure out.

But the business was beyond her. There were straps, his inert and sagging weight, the hollow of the crumpled cockpit. She had tried to climb on the wreckage and get her hands under his arms. His head lolled back, and she had found herself looking into his bloody face. It appeared terribly injured, as though in tearing his way through the trees a splintered bough had struck him in the face. No, it was beyond her strength. She climbed down, stood a moment looking at the wreckage to assure herself that there was no sign of fire. Was that fog or smoke? She bent down, her head close to the trailing arm. No, only the fog. She must get help.

III

She ran, following the slope of the hill until it flattened out and began to descend. She had a momentary glimpse of three fir trees on her left, and so knew that the house lay down yonder. She was thinking clearly and quickly. The doctor at Feldhurst, 'phone Dr. Heberden. Four people to carry, Will, the two women and herself. Would Mary Spray become emotional? She must not be allowed to become emotional. Something to carry the man on or in, a door, a blanket. Yes, a blanket. She could remember an old picture of Moore being carried in a blanket from the battlefield of Corunna. The garden wall loomed up greyly. There were figures at the gate, old Will and Jane.

"An accident, an aeroplane, just over the hill. Quick, all of you. Someone terribly hurt."

Old Will stared at her stark face.

"I thought I 'eered some'at."

She swept past him.

"Jane, fetch Mary. We shall want everybody. I'm going to telephone to Feldhurst. And Jane, get a blanket. Will, have you a knife?"

"I have, miss."

"He's strapped in. Wait here for me, Will. We must all go together because of the fog."

The good Jane, without a superfluous word, had gone upon her errand. Thank heaven, Jane was strong. She could move heavy furniture almost like a man. Miss Gerard hurried into the house. The telephone was in the pantry passage. She got through at once to Feldhurst with the helpful sympathy of the exchange. Yes, Dr. Heberden had just come in. Could she speak to Dr. Heberden at once? She did. She heard the familiar, deliberate, friendly voice, for Dr. Heberden was one of her few intimates.

"We're going to try and get him out of the wreckage. One's afraid of fire."

The voice said: "I'll be with you in twenty minutes."

She hurried back to the gate in the stone wall. Will was there, and Jane clasping a blanket and holding a protesting Mary by the arm.

"No, I can't come, I can't, reely. There'll be blood." Miss Gerard's voice surprised these three. "Mary, pull yourself together. All of us must help." The girl looked at Miss Gerard in the fog like a temperamental child that has been slapped, but the stimulus proved adequate. "I'm sorry, miss. I'm so soft hearted." The four of them went out into the fog.

SHE remembered feeling grateful to Will and Jane for taking the rescue out of her hands. The virtue had gone out of her for a moment, perhaps because Mary had said to her in the midst of the fog: "Oh, miss, look at your hand." There was blood on her left hand. Had she noticed it before and forgotten it? She could not say. She had spread the blanket just clear of the wreckage, and stood listening to what sounded like the chattering of Mary's teeth. How strong and capable those two old people were. She heard Will say, "He's only a bit of a lad. I've got he. Take his legs, Mother."

They were carrying him between them to the spread blanket. She was aware of an arm hanging and a hand trailing along the grass. She did not want to look at that clotted face, and instead she looked at old Will's face. It made her think of one of those troubled and compassionate countenances in a "Descent from the Cross." They were laying him on the blanket. She bent down, and lifting that trailing arm tucked it in close to the body.

Old Will's blue eyes stared. He was breathing hard.

"Mary, you take t'corner there."

She placed herself opposite Mary.

"I guess we can manage, miss."

"Can you, Jane?"

"I can, miss."

"We must lift all together."

"Better skirt round t'hill, miss."

"We mustn't get lost, Will."

"Guess I know how t'ground goes."

The fog seemed to thicken about them, and half-way to the house she told them to rest. "Put him down gently."

She was aware of Mary turning her face away, and of old Will's moustache grizzled with fog. They bent again to their work and, with the fall of the ground in their favour, the next carry brought them to the stone wall. Miss Gerard had remembered to leave the gate open and there was sufficient space between the pillars for them to squeeze through.

They came to the loggia and all four of them were panting.

"Where shall we put him, miss?"

Her long chair!

"Here, Will."

With one hand she managed to toss rug and cushion aside.

"Come this side, Jane. That's right."

The thing was lying on her chair. For to all four of them it had the qualities of an inert body which they had laboured to bring in out of the fog. It was both human, tragically so, and yet vaguely alien and frightening, as is something that is dead to those who are alive. Old Will was mopping his forehead with his cap. His daughter, with thin fingers pressed against her face, stood to look and could not look away.

"I'm sure he's dead, miss."

Miss Gerard seemed to wince. She gave Jane a glance which said, "Get the girl away." Jane's hand was laid on Mary's arm. "Come on, my girl. What you want is a cup of tea." Admirable, pragmatism Jane! But Miss Gerard remembered that the doctor would be here at any moment and that the gates were locked. She told Will to go and open them. There were two cars which were privileged to drive up to the house: Margaret's and Dr. Heberden's, both of whom were healers.

She was alone with that thing on the long chair. Who was he, what was he? Someone might care terribly whether he was dead or alive. What had Mary said? She turned and made herself look, not at the poor smashed

face, but at the buttons of his leather coat. Was he breathing; was there any movement? She fancied that there was. And then her eyes came to rest upon the hand of that obviously broken arm. She had laid it carefully across his chest. The hand interested her; the fingers were long and fine and delicate, and so was the texture of the skin. It was a sensitive hand, not the pragmatistical paw of some cheerful young cad to whom life was all noise and stunting.

Then she heard the doctor's car in the lane, and walked round the house to meet him. She had ceased to be shy of Tom Heberden, not merely because on sundry occasions she had been his patient, but because of the essential and sweet sanity of the man. He was big and brown and quiet, never flurried, rarely irritable, and he loved a garden as much as she did.

He got out of the car with a bag.

"Took longer than I thought. I had to crawl through the fog. Sorry you have had this tragedy."

She said: "We managed to carry him in. He is lying on my long chair in the loggia. I'm afraid he is terribly hurt."

He gave her an understanding glance.

"I see. What happened?"

"The fog. He was lost, I suppose, and flew into some trees on the hill."

They were walking round the house together. There seemed to be nothing more for her to do or say. The tragedy was in Heberden's hands, and probably he would prefer to have no interference.

"Shall I leave you alone? I shall be in the lower room."

"I'll call you."

She entered into the house and sat down on the sofa near the window in the room she called her parlour. Silence and the fog. She heard a clock ticking. And then she remembered the dog. She had left him shut up in her working room. Poor Prince, but with all these

strange happenings he would be safer in his kennel. She went up and brought the dog down, and handed him over to Jane in the kitchen.

"Take him to his kennel, Jane. The doctor's here."

"Yes, miss. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Presently."

Returning to the front of the house she heard the voice of Dr. Heberden calling her.

"Miss Gerard."

"Yes, coming."

She joined him in the loggia. He was standing looking down at the figure on the chair. The leather coat had been unbuttoned, the helmet removed. The lad had fair hair.

"Rather hopeless, I'm afraid."

"Is he——?"

"Just alive; that's all. Two ribs broken, as far as I can judge, and the arm. And his poor face. I imagine that a branch must have hit him in the face"

She noticed that his bag lay unopened on the garden table. Was it as hopeless as that?

"I had better ring up an ambulance and get him down to Westbourn."

"Yes."

"I'm afraid he will die in the ambulance."

She was conscious of a spasm of pity. She looked at Heberden and their eyes met.

"Why move him? Doesn't it seem rather callous to send him away to die? I mean, wouldn't it be more human if it happened here?"

"Quite. I agree. But I was thinking——"

"I'm not quite so complete an egoist. And perhaps there might be just a chance?"

Heberden's eyes thanked her.

"I was feeling that way also. There is too much of the idea of rushing a carcase into a truck. But, you mean——?"

"Can't we do just something? What someone might like done for him. Not just anonymous scavenging. We are three women here. There is a ground-floor room."

He nodded at her.

"Thank you, Miss Gerard. There are certain human decencies, even to the dying."

She turned to enter the house.

"We will bring a bed down. And will you be wanting things? I mean, you'll try?"

Again he nodded at her.

"I'll try to patch him up."

II

She remembered thinking while she and Jane were producing a new order out of chaos, how strange it was that this young Icarus should have crashed on the particular hillside of a temperamental person who hated the thundering lorries of the air. Strange! Was anything strange in life? You created an artifice and when some circumstance pushed your decorative scheme into disorder, it was no more surprising than all the precious Queen Anne furniture which she and Jane had huddled into corners. She came downstairs clasping a mattress, to be confronted by Heberden in his shirt-sleeves.

"I had better see to him out there. Rather a messy business. And not more than is absolutely necessary."

She understood him.

"Hot bottles in the bed?"

"Yes, that's the idea. And not dangerously hot."

"You'll want hot water."

"Please. Could you let me have Jane? She's a capable body."

Jane and old Will were putting up a single bed in that room which was so intimately hers. Would Jane go and help Dr. Heberden? Jane would. So, Miss Gerard helped Will with the bed, and was surprised to find that

her gardener knew more about the making of beds than she did, and that those crumpled hands of his could smooth and tuck in sheets and blankets. Well, he had been a widower for many years, and had had to do for himself and a child, before Mary had arrived at a relative maturity. Miss Gerard left Will to complete that bed, and went into the kitchen to see that the water was hot. She found Mary there, sitting like a cataleptic in a chair, with the dog lying on the hearthrug, watching her.

"Has Jane taken the hot water?"

"I don't know, miss. I've come over funny."

Miss Gerard found that the big kettle had been refilled. Thank heaven, old Jane did not come over funny! She filled two smaller kettles and found room for one of them on the stove. And where did Jane keep the hot bottles? Mary, appealed to, waggled her head on its meagre stalk of a neck. "Reely, I don't know, miss." Miss Gerard discovered them hanging behind the pantry door, and removing the covers laid them on the kitchen table ready for filling. She saw her own tea-tray on the table, bread and butter cut, one of Jane's plum cakes on a dish. Tea? These little punctuation marks remained in the letterpress of life, though death was at the door. She would make the tea, but not yet. No doubt Dr. Heberden would be glad of tea when he had finished with the perfunctory patching of that poor body.

She sat down on a Windsor chair. Mary appeared glued to the one arm-chair, and the dog, strangely quiescent, lay and watched the two women. Why all this emotion and disorder in this usually serene and rhythmic house? Miss Gerard heard sounds of movement, a shuffling of feet. They were carrying the thing in to put it in the bed. She realized that she had been expecting Heberden to come to her in the kitchen and say: "No use; I'm afraid he's gone."

She rose from her chair and proceeded to fill the two bottles. Had she asked Mary to do it the girl would have scalded her fingers.

"Get me a towel, Mary."

"Yes, miss."

She dried the bottles, slipped on the covers and carried them down the passage. Old Will was coming out of the room as she reached the door.

"Thank you for helping, Will."

He gave her a characteristic blue stare. Why thank a man for doing what was natural and obvious?

"I've got my frames to water, miss."

"Yes, Will, go and water the frames."

She saw Dr. Heberden standing by the bed, with his fingers on the unconscious airman's pulse. The disfigured face and the fair hair had disappeared behind swathing bandages. The broken arm lay in a supporting cradle of cushions, cushions from her sofa, but she was not conscious of any inward protest. Miss Gerard stood at the foot of the bed, while Jane slipped away and back to her kitchen.

Heberden took the hot bottles from Miss Gerard, held one against his cheek, and then tucked them into the bed.

"I've done as much as I dare. We shall have to leave it at that."

"Do you think he will live?"

"I'm afraid not."

"He may never recover consciousness?"

"No."

"So, it is just a question——?"

"Fractured skull, I expect, as well as the other things. I'll come along again later."

She said: "Jane has tea ready. You will have some before you go."

He followed her across the passage into the dining-room.

"I ought to try and get you a nurse."

"Is it necessary? I mean, if it is so inevitable, can't we manage?"

"You could, of course."

She stood by the window looking out at the fog.

"I'm just thinking that there must be people who ought to know, people to whom he must matter. And we know nothing, not even his name."

III

She remembered that she had a set of proofs to correct, and that she had promised her publisher that they should be returned corrected by the end of the week. She disliked the supervising of proofs, especially those ghastly "galleys" that trailed about like lengths of sanitary paper, for when a book was finished the mystery and the urge of it had been set alight in some successor. Her dilatoriness might be a source of irritation to those responsible for the producing of her books, but no curtness could be allowed to appear in her publisher's letters to the authoress who was their principal financial asset. Mr. Biederman employed pathos and humour.

DEAR MISS GERARD,

I looked in the glass this morning, and discovered that my hair has an added tinge of grey. Its cause, your very natural procrastination! But my dear lady——

She had received just such a letter by the morning's post, and its appeal had to be humoured. Poor Mr. Biederman! He had a very public wife who dragged him about to social occasions and charitable parties. She was one of those uncomfortable women with a sore soul. Poor Mr. Biederman! Miss Gerard went upstairs, sat down, lit a cigarette and prepared to deal with the proofs. It always seemed to her that a book creaked badly in the proof stage, and on this April evening she was conscious of her creation's mechanism. Rather dull, superior stuff! Or was it that she was more conscious of the unknown book whose pages were turning to their finis in the room

below? She found herself sitting and listening and wondering. But what was it she expected to hear? The cessation of that almost inaudible breathing? But could one be conscious of a cessation when one could not hear the very sound that was doomed to die away?

Poor lad!

She found herself looking at the fog outside her window instead of at the printed strips. What a strange invasion she had suffered! It was, she supposed, a mere incident in her secluded life, and yet it seemed so much more significant than her world of words. Death was so real and ruthless that it provoked you to remember that life can be very lovely. How old was he? What was his name? Was he married? Had he been flying his own plane, or was he a professional pilot employed by some aerial transport company? It seemed strange that she might never come to know anything about him, not in any sense that mattered.

But what was that? Voices, footsteps, people in her garden. Her sensitive habit of resenting any invasion made her rise and go to the window. The footsteps and voices went round the house to the porch. She heard the clangour of an old-fashioned bracket-bell. She had installed an electric-light plant, but the modern bell had seemed to her so superfluous.

Jane was coming up the stairs.

"Are you there, miss?"

"Yes, Jane."

"The police, miss."

"The police!"

Had she lived so much apart from the world that she had forgotten that no one can die or be born without some official recognition of the fact?

"Do they want to see me, Jane?"

"Yes, miss, they do."

But why should they wish to see her? She went downstairs to find a large man in plain clothes and a police sergeant in uniform standing self-consciously just inside

the dining-room doorway. The large man saluted her. He had a very red face and a florid and paternal manner.

"Inspector Harris, miss. We have just been to look at the wreckage. I'm sorry to trouble you, but I understand you witnessed the accident."

Miss Gerard said, "Won't you sit down," but the two men remained standing and, as though to reinforce her suggestion, she seated herself in the Sheraton arm-chair on the left of the fireplace.

"I cannot say that I saw the accident, Inspector. I heard it. You see, the fog was very thick."

"Quite so, miss. And you and your staff rescued the pilot and carried him here."

She answered with a movement of the head.

"We've identified the plane, miss. It belongs to the Blue Hawk Company. We've phoned their aerodrome. They will send a representative along. Meanwhile, miss, I want to see the pilot."

"Is it necessary? He is unconscious, and I'm afraid dying."

"I'm afraid I consider it necessary. If I might just step into the room."

She rose, and going to the door indicated that other door on the farther side of the passage.

"Because it seemed so hopeless, Inspector, we thought that it would be rather callous to send him elsewhere."

"Very kind of you, miss. I'm afraid it has caused you a lot of trouble."

He crossed the passage, followed by the sergeant, and disappeared into the other room, while she stood at the dining-room window and saw that the fog was thinning. She could distinguish the fir trees on the brow of the hill. And then she heard the movement of feet. The two men had been less than half a minute in the room across the passage.

"Looks bad, miss, I'm afraid. Directly we can be of any assistance to you, if you'll 'phone the Westbourn head station——"

She looked at the florid, good-natured face.

"You mean?"

"We'll send up and have him taken to the mortuary."

She understood that he was being considerate and helpful, but his crude presentation of the inevitable shocked her.

"Thank you, Inspector. I understand."

She stood listening to their footfalls passing along the paved terrace in front of the house, and suddenly the sun broke through. She saw it shining upon the tops of the tall firs. It did not occur to her that it might be an omen, and she returned to her desk and her proofs. She had been at work on them for less than an hour, when the sudden strange beauty of the evening, and yet another invasion, affected her simultaneously. She had risen and was standing at the window to look out upon a world that had reappeared with a brilliant freshness out of its grey wrappings. It was as though a sheath of white wool had been removed. The oblique light was shining upon the garden, picking out every point of colour. The green hill beyond had a gloss of gold. She heard a blackbird singing. How strange that anything should die on such an exquisite evening!

A car was coming up the lane. She heard it drive up to the house, and she supposed that the car was Dr. Heberden's. Voices, Jane's footsteps on the stairs, a deprecating knock.

"So sorry to trouble you, miss."

"Who is it, Jane?"

"A gentleman from the aerodrome."

Jane's gentleman belonged to a new dispensation, and Miss Gerard found him sitting on one of her Sheraton chairs, and wearing a leather coat and helmet. His face was large and white and obesely sinister, and out of it two little buttoned-up eyes looked at her. He stood up on a pair of short, stout legs, and introduced himself.

"My name's Cash. Blue Hawk Company. Sorry

about young Strange. Got into my car and crashed down here directly the police 'phoned us."

He was a common little man, potently self-important. He seemed to spit his words at her like some high-powered and vigorous mechanism.

"This damned fog, of course. Can't do anything with fog. First nasty crash we've had. Bad business."

She said: "Won't you sit down." She was wondering whether his use of the word business was sympathetic or objective.

"Not much hope, I hear. Pulped himself, poor devil. Lucky he was returning empty."

Mr. Cash sat down in his leather jacket.

"You see, I am the Blue Hawk Company. Seven years ago I was a motor mechanic."

His little eyes were little hard points of light. He seemed to swell in his leather jacket like some fat and efficient grub, and almost she could hear him saying: "Guts. Yes, I had the stuff in me." She was aware of his little eyes observing that blemish on her cheek, and she realized that she was the subject of inward comment.

"Got him in there, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Hospital case, surely?"

"It seemed so hopeless, Mr. Cash, that we——"

"I see. Very kind of you, I'm sure. You can take it from me that I'll pay the doctor's bill and all that. Insured, of course. I'm just going to look at the smash before it gets dark. Preferred to come myself."

She saw the creases melt out of his leather coat as he rose, but even though he filled her with a cold, dispassionate repugnance, she knew that there were questions she wished to ask him.

"Just one moment, Mr. Cash. I think you said the name was Strange?"

"Yes, Strange."

"I have been wondering about his relations."

"You needn't. So far as I know he hasn't got any. Just as well perhaps."

"No relations at all?"

"Well, I believe he has a sister or something in South Africa. Common or garden orphan, miss, one of those lads who are left with just enough money to keep them in carnations. Don't know much about him beyond that. He's been with us about six months; quiet sort of lad, good pilot, never gave me any trouble. Yes, now you've dug into it, miss, it does raise a bit of a problem."

His stubby fingers were at work on the buttons of his leather coat.

"Excuse me; finding this rather hot. My bus cruises at fifty. Yes, as we were saying, this does raise a bit of a problem."

"You mean, what to do——?"

"With his insurance money. I suppose that's up to the Insurance Company. Next of kin, what? Just like the war."

She was conscious of wanting to be relieved of Mr. Cash's presence. He had removed his coat, and discovered to her a green and grey check sports jacket, a blue pullover, and a collar and tie whose colours clashed. More and more she was feeling him to be like some gross and greedily efficient maggot that would eat the green heart out of life.

She said: "I think I understand. Please don't let me detain you, Mr. Cash. No doubt you wish to examine the wreckage."

"That's quite O.K., miss. Bound to be an inquiry. He was flying back empty from Le Bourget. Special charter to take a big financial bug to Paris. Much obliged to you. I expect the police will notify me. Good day to you."

But in the doorway he turned and smiled at her.

"Well, that's silly. Just where is the wreckage? Forgot to ask."

"If you go through that gate and over the hill, you will see it just by four oak trees."

"Much obliged. I've got my technical chap in the car. I'll give him a shout. Good day."

She watched him go out into the garden, and heard him shout.

"Hi, Balders, round 'ere."

And when silence returned to the garden she realized that the blackbird was still singing.

V

SHE found herself in conflict with the assumption that death was inevitable for the lad in that other room. Perhaps she had been thrown into conflict with certain figures of symbolism, the Cash creature who had outraged her compassion, the male's crude acceptance of death as a mere entry on the debit side of the ledger. As a woman who had suffered much in her secret self, her reaction to violence and wounds was quick, poignant and rebellious. Inherent in her was the elemental urge to give life and to preserve it. She may not have been conscious of it as an intimate and personal issue, but she moved to resist man's more facile fatalism.

As she opened the door of the room in which he lay she was aware of the evening sunlight shining in, and of the blackbird singing, of the joy and the anguish of life woven together in the green world out yonder. The room was very still. The familiar furniture, huddled into corners, seemed to question her and to protest. Why this upheaval, this disorder? She closed the door very gently, and crossed to the bed. Was he breathing? She thought that she could detect a slight movement of the bed clothes. His bare forearm and hand lay in the trough of the supporting pillows. She put out a hand and ran her fingers along his wrist, and the contact seemed to send a tremor through the part of her which resisted. She, too, could feel pulses, try to divine the yea or nay of life. The tips of her fingers throbbed to the heart-beat beneath his skin. He was alive. She found herself looking at his hand. There was a smudge of oil or something on it. She remembered the reek of petrol that had hung about the wrecked machine, and her fear of fire. A quiet lad.

Footsteps! She drew back quietly from the bed, almost as though she had been surprised in a moment of foolish tenderness. She saw Dr. Heberden's head and shoulders pass the window.

She met him in the passage. Was the doctor like those others, so ready to sign some document and surrender life to the official mortuary?

"I'm glad you've come. He is still alive."

Why did he look at her so sharply, as though she had said some unexpected thing?

"Yes, they linger sometimes. I remember a case in the war, an airman who was unconscious for weeks."

"And died?"

"No, as a matter of fact he recovered."

She had left the parlour door open, and she stood back to let him pass.

"Why not assume that there may be a chance?"

"Nothing would please me better."

He had crossed to the bed, and she moved round the foot of it and stood facing him.

"I have had people here."

"I'm afraid that was inevitable."

"So were they, and their prepossessions. A horrible little man from the aerodrome. And the police. They offered to relieve me at once of his dead body."

She seemed to repress herself. She was saying too much. She stood and watched Heberden's hand fasten on the inert wrist, and then her glance shifted to his face. He appeared to be counting those pulse beats, estimating their strength, rhythm and volume. What a pleasant and intelligent face he had, and the eyes of a man who understood that humanity asks you to be kind rather than clever. He raised his head, and with his fingers still on the pulse, looked across at her.

"He's got a better pulse, very distinctly better."

"Then there is a chance?"

"Perhaps a very faint one. It's so very difficult to say."

"I know it must be."

"I am glad we didn't move him. When a body is badly shocked, life is like a very feeble flame, so easily put out."

"Is there anything more that we can do?"

"I don't think so."

"You say that arm is broken. Oughtn't something to be done? Supposing he were to recover consciousness? But, forgive me, I am being meddlesome."

He smiled at her.

"Don't apologize for that. You see, he might be unconscious for days. You remember the case I was quoting to you. The lad had a broken leg, and the case seemed so hopeless that the German doctors did not bother about the leg, and during those weeks of unconsciousness the bones grew together. Months later the leg had to be rebroken and reset."

"Couldn't you put splints to that arm?"

"If it will give you any satisfaction I will."

"It may sound foolish to you, but it would."

Again he smiled at her.

"You may be right, you know. I hope you will be."

Afterwards he walked with Miss Gerard round her garden. He told her that he would look in again about ten o'clock, and function both as nurse and doctor. But what of the night-watch? Oh, she could manage, she and Jane between them. A thrush had taken up the black-bird's song; they could see the bird on the topmost twig of a cherry tree, and outlined against the afterglow. The tree itself was in full blossom. The light was fading into an April twilight, but the green growth and floweriness of the young year were as poignant as the smell of the wallflowers.

He said to her as they turned back after looking at the daffodils in the orchard: "I can never get used to the death-idea, especially when the earth is green with growth."

And especially when the patient is like that lad. One's gentle agnosticism doesn't carry one very far." She repeated those two words of his, "Gentle agnosticism." As a physician he was familiar with death, but to her, life would still throb somewhere beyond the veil like the voice of that singing bird.

"You will come back about ten? Is there anything I can get ready for you?"

He paused to scribble in his notebook, and tearing at the page he passed it to her.

"Have you any of those things in the house? Just tick them off if you have. Then I can bring what is necessary."

She took his pencil and marked off one or two of the items.

"No, I'm afraid, only some old linen."

He took back the list and pencil.

"I shall know what to bring."

Leaving her by the porch, he was in the act of getting into his car when someone hailed him. Mr. Cash's car, a speed model in red, was still parked close to a grass verge.

"Hi, one moment; are you the doctor?"

Mr. Cash appeared out of the dusk. He had resumed his leather coat, and his great white face looked like the hairless face of the full moon.

"Yes."

"My name's Cash. I'm the Blue Hawk Company. Just been to look at the smash. He did it pretty thoroughly. I suppose you'll be at the inquest?"

Heberden's manner became austere.

"Aren't you being a little previous, sir?"

"Hopelessly smashed up, isn't he? Have to think of these things, Doctor. There'll be an inquiry. My machine was O.K. It was just the ruddy fog."

Heberden got into his car.

"I quite understand your position, Mr. Cash."

"I was going to say, Doc, that the damage is on me."

Send your bill in to us when the whole business is over. We insure, you know."

The doctor pressed the starter-button.

"I haven't yet begun to think of my bill, Mr. Cash."

"Well, I suppose you'll want your money, anyway. Most people do. My name's Cash, remember."

"I think I see the joke, sir. Good night."

11

Miss Gerard entered his room about twelve. A full moon was shining, and so still was the night that she could hear the wash of the sea at the foot of the cliffs. The moonlight lit up the room sufficiently for her to distinguish the shape of him in the bed, the splintered arm and bandaged head. Was the moonlight too bright? But how could it be, when he was sleeping like some prince in a fairy tale? Heberden had paid his last visit at ten o'clock and helped by Jane had played the nurse. The doctor had been more hopeful, but guardedly so. "Just a flicker. One can't say more." She stood by the bed, listening. She could hear the faint wash of the sea; on nights such as this the sound would travel up those twin valleys. But, surely, there was some other sound in the room, a faint sighing like a curtain drifting to and fro? His breathing? Yes, his breathing was audible, and as she listened to it this little sibilant sighing seemed to gain in strength. Was she imagining it? Was her sense of hearing concentrated sensitively on that sound and amplifying it? She bent nearer; she could see the bed-clothes rising and falling.

The fluttering of a leaf! But life still clung to the tree, and very softly she slipped out of the room, and leaving the light burning in the passage she re climbed the stairs. She was feeling extraordinarily wakeful, and

sitting down in an arm-chair by her window, she suffered the day's happenings to drift across her consciousness. She had arranged to sit up till three o'clock and then to wake Jane.

But if she was so wakeful why should she not complete the correcting of those proofs? She had not troubled to undress, for she had no intention of going to bed until Jane took charge, and Jane had hinted that she was going to render the early hours useful by making marmalade. "I can keep looking in on him." Indefatigable old woman! Miss Gerard crossed the landing to her working-room, switched on the desk-light and sat down. The window was open, and so was the window of the room below. She unscrewed the cap of her fountain-pen and set to work. There was a somewhat unusual name in the book and the printer had managed to misspell it, and since the name occurred very frequently Miss Gerard's pen was kept busy. Why had not the proof-reader spotted the error? But no doubt the proof-reader, like other mortals, preferred the excitement and the glory of hunting literary slips, or of catching the author bending.

Bother the name! She began to wish she had used a more obvious surname, but the character in question was an unpleasant one, and Miss Gerard had suffered from enterprising people who had attempted to inflict legal blackmail upon her because she happened to have used a particular name. Slushman, Slushman, Slushman, the wretched thing kept recurring. Slushman might be both apposite and descriptive, but it was too like Dickens and she kept on restoring the necessary vowel. Slashman. Would anyone pop up with the name of Slashman and accuse her of besmirching the family honour?

Her pen paused abruptly over the twentieth correction. What was that? For three seconds or so she sat listening, and then she was running down the stairs. She remembered saying to herself that even the wisest of physicians can misread a case. But she had been swept

away by a sound, something between a moan and a whimper that became terribly and poignantly articulate, like the outcry of a child waking from a nightmare.

She switched on the light as she entered the room. She was aware of a hand groping and clutching at the bandages. Instantly she was by the bed and gently suppressing that wandering hand.

"You must keep quite still, Mr. Strange."

She felt the muscles in the arm relax. His mouth mumbled at her from amid the dressings.

"Where am I?—What—?"

"You must lie quite still. Please don't struggle. You have had an accident. You are in bed."

The dark terror had left him panting. She sat on the edge of the bed with one hand laid firmly but gently on his.

"Accident, crash?"

"Yes, in the fog. You don't remember. Don't try to remember. It doesn't matter."

"I don't remember."

"Just lie still."

She was aware of the fingers of his hand bending over and clasping hers. Like a child he wanted to grasp something, feel reassured by human contact.

"Where am I?"

"In my house, on the Sussex coast. There is nothing for you to worry about."

She was conscious of the grip of his fingers.

"Who is it? I can't see."

"Just the person who lives here. We brought you in."

"What's your name?"

"My name? Oh, Gerard, Rosamund Gerard."

She felt his fingers relax. He breathed out a little sigh.

"How funny! Everything's gone. What's happened to my left arm?"

"The doctor had to put it in splints, my dear. What you have to do is to lie still and not worry."

Her immediate urge was to run to the 'phone and ring up Dr. Heberden. What did one do when a man came back to life so suddenly? Poor Dr. Heberden! But she was very glad that she had continued to allow her house a telephone, even though her number was not in the directory. She made a movement to withdraw her hand, but instantly his fingers closed upon it.

"Please don't go away."

"I'm only going to the telephone. I want the doctor to know."

"You'll come back?"

"Of course. Tell me, does the arm hurt?"

"No, everything feels numb."

She patted his hand and slipped away, conscious of a sudden inward exultation, and of an emotion that she had not experienced before save in certain passages in her books. Poor Dr. Heberden, it seemed churlish to wake him at one in the morning, but she had the receiver in her hand and was listening to the voice of the night operator. "Dr. Heberden's of Feldhurst, please. Miss Gerard speaking from Knoll Farm." She stood tense yet trembling; waiting upon the night's silence, and then she was listening to Heberden's voice. "Hallo, who's that?" "Miss Gerard, Doctor, I'm so sorry to call you up." No, she wasn't sorry. "He's awake, and quite rational. No, I don't want to drag you here. I wondered what I ought to do. Make him keep perfectly quiet? Yes, it is rather amazing. You are coming? How very good of you."

Returning to the room she drew a chair up to the bed.

"The doctor's coming."

"I'm afraid I'm giving you an awful lot of trouble. What's all this on my head?"

"Bandages."

"How did it happen?"

"You were flying an aeroplane, and there was fog."

"I don't remember any fog. I don't remember. I ought to be able to remember."

She put her hand on his.

"Why? Why worry?"

"You are being awfully good to me. What's the time?"

"About one o'clock in the morning."

"One o'clock in the morning! And you're sitting up! There isn't any reason, is there? I'm quite all right."

"Yes, but you mustn't talk. I'm just going out to see that the gates are open for the doctor's car. It is a beautiful night and the moon is shining."

And then he said an unexpected thing to her.

"I do wish I could see you."

She withdrew her hand gently, but her conscious self flinched as she remembered.

"Well, you will do, quite soon."

"You'll come back, won't you?"

"Yes."

She went out into the moonlight and down to the blue gates. She was angry with herself and moved to self-mockery. Silly, sensitive fool, of course he would have to see her face. How could it matter to either of them? Youth had flown into her life for a moment, and just as swiftly and fortuitously it would fly out again. But he was going to live. Was she not glad of that? Of course, but somehow the crisis had suffered a sudden transformation, and like a ruthless mirror it confronted her. But why should she care? Had sentimentality and the name of Slushman got into her head? Idiot!

Heberden's car. She heard it coming up the lane and she went and stood in the gateway. The car's headlights glared at her. Was she afraid of the light?

She stepped on to the running-board as he slowed up.

"Thank you for coming."

"I had to, after being so utterly wrong."

"Oh, no."

"It is sometimes good to be wrong. I postulated a fractured base. Well, there may be. How did it happen?"

"He just woke up rather like a frightened child. I was correcting proofs and I heard him."

She stepped off the running-board as the car stopped by the porch.

"I'm so glad."

"So am I, even though my prognosis was so wrong. Shall I tell you what I'm going to do?"

"Yes."

"Put him gently to sleep again. That's the best anodyne for all shocks, both mental and physical."

III

Miss Gerard was in the garden when Jane came to her. It was about eleven o'clock, and the sun was shining.

"Oh, miss, he's just woke up."

Miss Gerard was trimming the grass verges with long-handled shears.

"He wants you, miss."

Miss Gerard left the shears lying and drew off her gloves.

"Oh, keep Prince with you, Jane," for Prince, as though sensing some strangeness in the day, had followed his mistress like her shadow.

"Go with Jane, Prince, dear."

The dog gave her a dumb and troubled look and obeyed.

She found herself beside the bed. His right hand was being outstretched.

"Is that you?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I felt——"

She put her hand on his.

"Strange, waking up?"

"Yes. Just like a silly kid. Who was that?"

"Oh, Jane, my treasure."

"It sounds silly, doesn't it, but I wanted you. You are young like I am."

She sat sideways on the bed, holding his hand.

"I'm not quite so old as Jane."

"I can tell that you're young by your hand."

VI

ANOTHER day had passed, perhaps the most lyrical yet elusive day that could be written of in her book of April. Something sang in her, the spring, birds, youth, that blemished youth of hers that had been young bitterly and in secret. All sorts of things happened.

He had said to her: "Isn't it strange our coming together like this? I seem to have heard your voice before. And what's that I smell? Wallflowers?"

"Yes."

She had gone out and picked him a posy.

"Yes, I can smell them in spite of all the old doctor's wonderful dressings."

She had led Prince in by the collar and introduced the dog to the strange new thing in the bed. "Hallo, old chap. What is he? An Alsatian?" and Prince, after staring at the bandaged apparition, had licked its hand.

"He doesn't make friends easily."

The young man's hand fondled the dog.

"Prince won't quarrel with me."

Then, about twelve o'clock, Mr. Cash had arrived with a lorry and a breakdown gang from the aerodrome to salvage the wrecked plane. She had felt kind even to Mr. Cash, and had brought him to youth's window and suffered him to be briefly and facetiously friendly.

"Hallo, Wal, my lad, we thought you were for a halo."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about it, Mr. Cash."

"Haloes, what! Not much! We're collecting the bits of the old bus. Well, you look pretty comfortable."

"Miss Gerard's been——"

But Miss Gerard herself had been in charge of the interplay. She had been standing beside Mr. Cash, and

she had dared to lay a hand on the leather-jacket's shoulder. Mr. Cash had been persuaded to remember the day's affairs and not to mangle the soft bud of an illusion.

"He's not allowed to talk."

Mr. Cash had nodded at her.

"Bye-bye, Wal. Glad there's not going to be an inquest."

Why did that particular word stick like a burr to her secret consciousness? Was it that she knew that she would be driven to holding an inquest on her own reincarnation? She had watched Mr. Cash and his minions go over the hill, and she returned to youth's window.

"I hope you did not mind my letting him speak to you?"

He did not answer her immediately.

"I have seen Mr. Cash. I mean I know his face. It's somehow more vivid to me here in the darkness."

"Some things are."

"I oughtn't to say it, but it's like a thing hanging up in a butcher's shop."

She understood him instantly.

"Forget it."

"No need, Miss Gerard. I'm lying here and thinking that in a day or two I shall be seeing something that isn't like that."

"The window, and a green hill, and fir trees."

"No, please forgive me, you."

She remembered flinching from the window, and then making herself go back and answer him, lest he should think her silence snubbing and upon its dignity.

"You may find me quite an old woman!"

But problems seemed to arrive for her like the birds she fed in winter at her window. There were ministrations that were not for her hands, intimate things that had to be done for him by Heberden and the district nurse whom the doctor had co-opted into the affair. Also, she came by the impression that Heberden was worried

about some aspect of the case, and was keeping details back from her. He had spoken vaguely of bruising about the eyes, even hinted that his prognosis was not yet complete. Also, he was suggesting that the lad could be moved in a day or two to the County Hospital at Westbourn. It was still very much a nursing case, and Miss Gerard's household was being subjected to too much disorganization.

"It's a nice lad. I want to do the best for him. And I'm afraid your work must be suffering."

Her work? Beyond completing the correcting of the proofs of her autumn book she had not put pen to paper since the thing had happened. The world of her imagination seemed to have given place to the world of actuality. Had youth read any of her books? And did it matter? Most certainly it mattered, for he might have gained from her book an impression of her that was not what she might wish it to be. Men are apt to be shy of clever women. Of much more significance was the suggestion that he should be transferred to the Westbourn General Hospital. Did she desire it? Yes, and no. And in confronting her own hesitations she suddenly accused herself of harbouring a preposterous illusion. What was he to her, and what could she be to him? In fact, she was on the edge of trying to create a sentimental situation, because compassion and the spring and wounded youth had tumbled out of the sky into her solitude.

She compelled herself to say to Heberden: "Of course, it is much better that he should be moved. My work? I have that always with me."

She retained the impression that Heberden was worried.

"I'll keep him here for another day or two, if I may. I'm not quite at the bottom of the case yet. One cannot always make a complete examination until certain things have settled down. I have arranged for Nurse Horrocks to come in and do all that is necessary."

"Thank you so much. Is it the question of the injury to his face?"

"Yes. You see, there was so much bruising, so much swelling. One could not make a complete examination."

"I understand."

"I think I shall be able to say more definitely to-morrow."

How absurd of her to shrink from the inevitable revelation, the withdrawing of that veil of darkness, yet for two or three days in her lonely life she had expressed herself as woman, not a creature juggling with words, but experiencing actual emotion. "You are young like I am." Had he found her hands and voice and unseen presence sweet and mysterious? And how he would be disillusioned when he saw her poor face! How brutal and ironical life could be! Self-pity! Cowardice! That a few square inches of discoloured skin should shame her into behaving like a sensitive, self-adoring girl! Would it not be much better for him to go before the veil was lifted?

She would speak to Heberden about it, suggest that he should be moved at once.

But would not that be to confess her cowardice? Heberden might divine her silly vanity.

She procrastinated.

II

Youth too was becoming inquisitive, but not blurting its questions like a child. What did she do with herself in the country—chicken farm, grow fruit, or was she sufficiently well off just to live as she pleased in the country? Of course he understood that, delight in pure country. And had she ever been up in a plane?

"No."

"You will have to let me take you up."

She understood from his questions that no one had gossiped to him about her, not even the genial Nurse Horrocks, and that he had not tried to pump them.

She was glad of this reticence and its implied delicacy. So, no one had told him that she was a bookish person, a celebrity. How pleasant!

She asked him whether he would like to be read to. Yes, but was he not taking up too much of her time? No. She said that she spent two or three hours a day in reading, and that she might just as well read aloud as to herself.

Was there any author he preferred?

"There is one book I haven't read, and want to. 'A Pilgrimage of Pain,' by Douglas Gerard. By the way, it's your name. Is he any relation of yours?"

She held her breath over this coincidence.

"A rather distant cousin. I happen to have the book."

"You've read it before. It won't bore you?"

"No."

So she began on that very day to read her own book to him, and never had it seemed to her so inadequate and unconvincing. But he did not find it so. He said it was wonderful stuff, and so true to life, and how the chap must know women! She began to feel a little ashamed of her deception. If only her physical self were like her book?

"I think I hear the doctor's car."

She divined in him sudden excitement.

"He's going to take off all this stuff. I shall have my eyes back."

"Yes. You are sure you have had no pain in them?"

"Nothing. Only a sort of stiffness, as though they were glued up."

She laid the book aside on the window-shelf and went out to meet Heberden, and directly she saw the thing he was carrying she knew that her crisis was upon her. That black surgical bag. The rose-tinted glasses of an illusion were about to be broken.

"I have just been reading to him. One of my books. Please don't tell him I wrote it."

"Your book? I won't. Did he ask for it?"

"Yes."

"That's rather delightful."

But her feeling was that Heberden was not happy about something.

She took the dog with her and, climbing the hill, sat down on the seaward side at the foot of a tree. It was another perfect day. There had been a light frost, but the sun had dried the grass and the world was rejoicing. The sea spun shot silk, the gorse was ablaze, a few white clouds were drifting. The green tops of the firs made never a murmur. Below her and to the left stood the four oak trees where his plane had crashed, and she could see the broken branches, some of them hanging twisted, others on the ground. Those poor trees had suffered just when their buds were swelling in the spring. The wreckage of the aeroplane had gone, but there were scars on the green turf.

How beautiful and solitary it was. Solitude! She had sought solitude, clasped it, but now somehow it filled her with a kind of fear. Yes, even on this serene and beneficent morning. There were other mornings, the normal and vile progeny of an English spring, when there was nothing for her to do but sit in her room and write, or put on thick shoes and go out and trudge. It had been widely said that a creative artist should not be happy, for happiness is too domestic and sociable, and associated with silly, simple things. She was neither silly nor simple, yet she had a feeling that she could be both.

Prince had his head on her knee. She caressed him and he gave a sigh of contentment. She was belonging to him this morning. Did dogs feel lonely? But of course. How long had she been sitting on this gentle hill? It was time for her to go back and face her crisis, and to become Miss Gerard, both celebrated and celibate, a rather austere and shy woman, who carried life in her books like strange fruit in a gilded dish, fruit that was forbidden to her.

"Up, my dear."

Descending the landward slope of the hill she could

look down into the garden and the orchard, and see them as hers, secret places in which her lonely self went to and fro. She came to the Italian gate, and through it saw the flowers and the grass, and the stone path going up to the house. She paused at the gate. Heberden was sitting in the loggia as though waiting for her. He was leaning forward, hands clasped, head slightly bowed. She walked up the path, her eyes fixed on the crown of the doctor's head. His attitude suggested—— And then he raised his head, and she saw his face.

What was he going to tell her?

"I'm afraid I have kept you."

He stood up. He glanced at the particular window.

"I had to wait. Let's go this way, into the orchard."

So youth was not to hear what he had to say. She was conscious of inward tension.

"Something unexpected?"

"Yes. I was afraid of it. His eyes."

"Not——?"

"Rather terrible. Just as though a forked branch had caught him in the face. You see, there was so much bruising and swelling when I first examined him. One couldn't see what was behind the lids. I thought it wiser to wait."

Her voice came breathlessly.

"You mean, he can't see? He will be——?"

Heberden was staring down the green alleys of the orchard.

"Yes. I'm horribly afraid it is so."

"Does he realize?"

"No."

"Oh, my dear friend, can't we do something? Blind! It's too tragic."

"I'll get someone in at once. There is quite a good man on eyes in Westbourn. I'll 'phone. But I'm afraid it's rather hopeless. Both eyeballs are like so much pulp."

III

He was to be blind, and he did not know it.

Never was she to forget that moment of secret and selfish exultation, and her sudden horror of it as she thrust it away deep down like some evil thing that had escaped from the darkness. One's little shameful vanities! Nor was she to forget the bright and definite face of the doctor who came up from Westbourn. He was a mignon man, polished, efficient, final, even as to chin and glasses. They had called her into the dining-room, and with both doors closed had given her their verdict.

"But can nothing be done?"

Dr. Steel had explained to her why nothing could be done, and as she had listened to him she had seemed to see those two delicate organs as so much blood and jelly.

"Completely disorganized, Miss Gerard; ruptured. Terribly bad luck."

He had spread the first and middle fingers of his right hand.

"Imagine a broken bough with a fork like that catching him in the face. That's how it must have happened."

She had looked at those pointed fingers and shuddered.

"Please, don't. Yes, I think I understand. And you will not be able——?"

"Yes, I'm afraid we shall have to operate, remove both eyeballs. I will take him into hospital."

She had turned to the window, and looking up at the green hill and its trees realized what blindness meant, no sky, no woods and hills, no sea, no faces.

"Have you told him?"

"No."

She had heard Heberden's quiet, deliberate voice.

"We wondered whether we would leave it for a day or two. We have put on new dressings. He doesn't realize——"

"Are you sure?"

"We told him that the lids——"

"You want to let the knowledge come gradually. But won't the shock be more bitter? I mean, days of hope, of concealment, and then——"

The two doctors had looked at each other.

"There is something in what you say, Miss Gerard. We had discussed it before you came in. Would you tell him?"

She stood rigid.

"I?"

"Yes, your touch might be lighter. I know it is not a pleasant thing to do."

She had turned and faced them.

"Very well, I will tell him."

VII

How would she begin to tell him? How would she handle such a situation in a book? Books? This was no dispassionate and impersonal piece of word painting, the work of a woman sitting calmly in a chair. She felt herself involved in his tragedy, even as though his falling out of the skies into her life had been meant.

She remembered having read in a book written by a man who had become blind that the loss of sight was not to be accepted as a tragedy. One was to make a brave jest of it, regard it as a kind of game of perpetual blind-man's-buff in which one played hide-and-seek with the furniture and your food. No self-pity, no repinings, but courage and a re-education of yourself. Yes, it might be possible for a man who had reached middle age and to whom blindness had come gradually, to adapt his life and his philosophy to the fall of the curtain, but for the thing to happen suddenly and ruthlessly to a young man was indeed tragedy. How could a blind bird fly?

She went into the kitchen to speak to Jane, for Jane had all the kindness and common sense of her class.

"It is a very terrible thing, Jane, but the doctors say that Mr. Strange is to be blind."

Jane was rubbing something through a sieve.

"Poor young gentleman."

"They have asked me to tell him."

"The sooner the better, miss, I should say."

"Would you?"

"He'll only lie there and think about things that can't happen."

"Yes, that's true, Jane."

It might be more kind to tell him quickly. She went into the garden and picked a bunch of wallflowers and took them with her into his room. How did one speak in such a crisis, with a gentle cheerfulness, stressing the obvious compensations? It was lucky for him that he was alive. But would he welcome a life that was sightless?

She sat down beside the bed and laid the flowers close to his right hand.

"You have to guess what's there."

His face had been rebandaged, and the blank white mask seemed to question her.

"Not much guessing. I can smell them."

"It's good to be able to smell things, and to hear, and to touch."

He had groped for the flowers and found them.

"Nothing like seeing. When you are up in a plane it's marvellous to have eyes. But what did the doctors say?"

She was conscious of pausing, groping for her words as his fingers had felt for the flowers.

"They want you to go into hospital."

"Must I?"

"Yes."

"Of course I must. I can't stay here putting you to all this trouble."

"It isn't trouble, my dear. You see, there is something else."

"An operation?"

"Yes."

She was conscious of a significant stillness penetrated by his blind self, groping, questioning, feeling suddenly frightened.

"What for? Not something with my eyes?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"They are all right, aren't they?"

"No. You see——"

She saw him drop the flowers on the bed, and his hand reaching out to her.

"Miss Gerard."

"Yes, dear."

"I'm not going to be blind?"

For a moment she felt herself unable to speak to him.

"For God's sake tell me quickly."

She took his hand and held it.

"Yes, I'm afraid that is what they say. Oh, my dear, I wish I hadn't had to tell you."

She felt the grip of his fingers. He did not move or utter a sound, but lay there in a dry and dreadful anguish, and in a darkness that was to be for ever. It wrung her heart. What could she say or do? And then he was shaken by an agony that was not soundless, a terrible, tragic despair that was beyond control, convulsive sounds, a suggestion of his young and sightless self struggling with his horror of the realization of that darkness.

She must do something.

She held his hand between both of hers, but that did not seem sufficiently human, and slipping from the chair to the bed and with her back to the pillows she took his head upon her shoulder. She remembered the man Cash telling her that he had no one to turn to. But had he no one? Surely there would be some girl? She did not care. Her mother-mood was importunate.

"Just let go, dear."

His head sank a little till it lay against her breast. He was sobbing and his man's grief harrowed her. She sat looking at the bunch of flowers lying on the quilt like a child's discarded toy.

"I'm—I'm so sorry, Miss Gerard."

"Why should you be sorry, dear?"

"For being such a beastly coward."

"Oh, no. I know how you must be feeling. Don't try to think of being in a dark room from which there is no escape. Try to say there are going to be all sorts

of wonderful things in life. Forgive me, but there will be, other, other——”

She could say no more. Words seemed so futile. She sat and stroked his head, and felt her own heart beating near it. Her touch seemed to soothe him; his body relaxed.

“I am glad it was you who told me.”

“I?”

“Yes. Don’t take your hand away. It helps.”

“Does it?”

“Yes. You’re young; you can understand.”

He lay breathing quietly. Her left arm was round him, her right hand gently stroking his swathed head. How dreadfully disturbing emotion could be, especially so in a life like hers when your creative and separative self asked for a dispassionate serenity.

“Aren’t there things you want to tell me?”

“What things?”

“Aren’t there people who ought to know?”

“No.”

“No one?”

“No one to whom it can matter seriously. I have been rather a separative sort of kid. That’s a little ironical. I didn’t miss people till a moment ago, and then I suddenly seemed to realize—I wanted to shout for help like someone drowning. If you hadn’t been here. You’ve been wonderful to me. Why should you trouble?”

She smiled poignantly.

“Oh, just nature; because I’m not absolutely granite.”

“Granite! What an idea! With your hands. And when?”

“Yes?”

“Are they going to move me?”

She was silent for some seconds.

“Perhaps to-morrow.”

“Where to?”

“Westbourn.”

"It won't be far away?"

"No."

"You'll come and see me?"

"Of course."

He lay thinking.

"I suppose I shall feel rather like a lost soul, whatever that may mean. It's all going to be so strange and different. Like a high blank wall, rather terrifying."

"Try not to think of it as that. It will be like beginning all over again, but differently. You'll want——"

She felt him draw a deep breath.

"Yes, what shall I want? Impossible things. Someone to lead me about like a dog on a string? No, I won't be that. I'll fight against that sort of thing. I've got to, haven't I?"

"Yes, dear."

"I have a little money of my own. Blind men do learn to do things, don't they?"

"Of course. All sorts of things."

He lay still for a moment.

"Miss Gerard, there's one thing that does seem to loom up and frighten me, like fog when you're flying. Loneliness, feeling that you are shut in and helpless."

"My dear, I think you'll find people who will save life from being like that."

II

Dr. Heberden rang her up that afternoon to say that everything had been arranged and that the ambulance would call for Mr. Strange at ten o'clock to-morrow; Dr. Steel would operate on the following day, if Strange's general condition warranted it. And had she told him?

"Yes, I've told him. He was terribly upset, poor lad, but he has courage."

"I'm glad of that. He's young and he will have to

be taught how to manage himself. By the way, he hasn't anything to take into hospital, has he?"

"You mean?"

"Kit."

"No, nothing, of course. And I am afraid I have nothing here. I suppose you couldn't——?"

"I'll get my wife to pack up a parcel."

"Could you? I will see that everything is replaced."

Later, she found herself confronted by Nurse Garnet, and Nurse Garnet was one of those very positive people with a "Now, my dear" smile and very capable and busy hands. Why should she suddenly mistrust Nurse Garnet and her rotund pragmatism? Was it because the other woman's glance seemed to have rested for a moment on the disfigured side of her face? The inwardness of things had changed for her. She was realizing that he would never see her face, but that some officious and bright person might tell him about it, someone like this genial woman who went about giving life playful and stimulating slaps.

"Oh, Nurse Garnet, I want to speak to you just for a moment before you go in."

Miss Garnet nodded at her.

"I've heard. Poor young man."

"Dr. Heberden told you."

"Yes."

"Oh, well, I needn't say anything. I was going to warn you. You see, he was——"

"A little hysterical. Can you wonder?"

"No, not exactly that, but broken down for the moment."

"Shock, Miss Gerard."

"Exactly."

How very foolish of her to be shy of leaving that other woman alone with him! Nurse Garnet had taken herself and her bag, and a jug of hot water and a clean towel into Mr. Strange's room, and Miss Gerard had carried out a chair and placed it not far from the particular

window. She found herself listening to those two voices, and especially to Nurse Garnet's voice. Nurse Garnet might have been addressing a helpless and sensitive child. "Now then, Mr. Strange, just turn over like that. I'll take charge of your arm. That's splendid," and suddenly some inward shame flamed in Miss Gerard. She was eavesdropping, listening in to that other woman's voice in order to hear whether Nurse Garnet would gossip about the mistress of the house. How utterly contemptible one's self-love could be! She was up and out of her chair and walking quickly away towards the gate in the stone wall, but before she reached it she remembered poor Prince. She was neglecting her dog, being disloyal to her dog. She turned back, and calling to the Alsatian saw him come leaping out of the dining-room window.

"Come on, my dear, walk," and with the dog at her heels she took one of the valley paths leading to the sea.

Yet Nurse Garnet did produce her sensation, and quite innocently and unexpectedly so. It was her habit to chat cheerfully to patients, especially when she considered the subjects had to be rescued from too much introspection. Had Mr. Strange read any of Miss Gerard's books? Books? Gerard, Douglas Gerard? But did he not know that his hostess was the celebrated novelist?

"The author of 'A Pilgrimage of Pain'?"

"Authoress, Mr. Strange. I think it is the most wonderful book I have ever read."

"I didn't know. She has been reading to me. I asked for it."

"How tactful of you."

"Tactful. But she's quite young, Nurse."

Miss Garnet liked to be facetious.

"Not exactly a grandmother. You see she must have begun writing when she was a mere flapper. Of course, genius can be a little odd, Mr. Strange."

"Odd?"

"Well, Miss Gerard doesn't like publicity. Almost a recluse, you know, so sensitive."

And there the conversation as it concerned Miss Gerard ended, and youth was left in its new and terrible darkness to confront a future whose realities were like trees in a wood. He kept blundering against a succession of seemingly insoluble problems. Where would he live and how? His private income amounted to about a pound a week. How would he shave himself, tie his tie, find his clothes, feed himself? He supposed that he would be compelled to seek admission to some institution such as St. Dunstan's, where you were taught to manage yourself and your life, to read Braille, to learn some trade. The prospect appalled him. His life had been in the air, and he was to become like a blind bird in a cage. He could not even go and seek his food; it would have to be brought to him. Never again would he see a human face, the face of woman, or the green earth or shop windows, or his own hands. How did one know when one's hands were dirty? Did one care? Would anything matter seriously, whether you became a sloven, whether your habits——?

Terror returned to him, fear of his own blind self and its almost sinister implications. Why was it he had not liked the feel of the nurse's hands! They were not like Miss Gerard's hands. Rosamund. A celebrity, a tremendously clever woman! Almost he was afraid of her cleverness. But did it matter? He was going away; he was nothing to her; she had just been extraordinarily kind to him. Pity. Was she dark or fair? Oh, dark, of course, with one of those white skins, and deep brown eyes. Inevitably, perhaps, he thought of her as being beautiful, for to him her voice and hands were beautiful. And she was young, a little older than he was, just a few years, but it seemed so right that she should be a little older than he was. Twenty-four and twenty-nine! Miserable, blind dreamer, why was he fooling himself with all this sentimental nonsense?

Fear possessed him. He could not bear life, or support its bewildering newness. He lay and listened. The house

seemed so dead and silent. Better dead! He wanted sound, movement, some human presence near him, her, her voice, her hands. She understood. She—— Oh, what a futile, whimpering child he was! As though his blindness could matter to a woman who had the whole world at her feet, who had work to do, and who was rich and famous.

He lay and listened. Where was she? He wanted to hear her voice. This horrible helplessness! He could not go and seek her and say—— His broken arm ached, but that was as nothing compared with the ache of his soul. Had she gone out? But she was to go out of his life tomorrow. Hospital. She might come and see him, once, twice, and then his very blindness would descend between them like some impenetrable fog. He would be sent away somewhere to try to pick up the tangled threads in the darkness. He would not even be able to write to her.

A moment later he heard the barking of a dog. Prince was playing one of his games, leaping over a stick which his mistress held and challenging her to hold it higher. What a blessed thing it would be to be a dog, her dog, a creature that could run and leap and look.

"Miss Gerard."

She left the dog lying on her long chair in the loggia.

"Nurse Garnet gone? Oh, yes, I see she has. I have just been taking the dog out."

She was trying to be obviously and impersonally kind, a younger sister of Nurse Garnet's, with unemotional hands and starched cuffs.

"It is nearly tea-time."

"Is it? I have rather lost my sense of time. By the way, Nurse Garnet told me."

What had the wretched woman told him? She sat down on the sofa under the window.

"Nurse Garnet is, I expect, something of a gossip."

"Oh, it wasn't gossip. It couldn't be. I mean talking

to a woman like that about you. I found out who you really are. Awfully *bête* of me."

He heard her laugh.

"That I write books? Don't let that make either of us self-conscious."

"But I ought to have known."

"Why? Because I am supposed to be a celebrity? That's one blessed thing about one's dog; it doesn't matter whether you are a highbrow or a fool."

"But you don't quite understand what I mean."

"How?"

"That book of yours you were reading to me. Anyone who could write a book like that isn't quite like other people. What I am trying to say is that I understand now why you are different."

"Do you think so? One does not court social popularity by being odd."

"Not odd, Miss Gerard. That's the very last word I should use. I mean you're so compassionate and quick. I want you to tell me: do you think blindness can make one a kind of selfish sot? I've been thinking. I'm still such a coward."

She rose, crossed the room, and sat down by the bed.

"No, my dear, surely blindness can still feel beauty. One has such a horror of being either priggish or sentimental. They call me sentimental in my books, but I'm not really. Tell me about the things that frighten you."

"May I?"

"Of course."

"But I'm just taking up your time. I expect I have been stopping you working."

"I haven't felt like working. You are worrying about all sorts of things."

"Everything. One is going to be so damned helpless. I have always been rather sensitive about worrying other people, asking them to do things. It's a horrible idea that one might become a sort of slobbering, helpless idiot."

"I'm sure you will never be that."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. It will mean months of adaptation. I think I should try to visualize it as a new adventure, exploring life in a new way."

"Even keeping oneself clean? Yes, physically clean. It needn't be just vanity, need it?"

She sat with folded hands, trying to feel herself into the darkness with him.

"Oh no, something finer than that. If one is fastidious and sensitive, does not one go on being fastidious and sensitive? And aren't you rather letting things rush at you? Oh, it's natural enough. One must feel overwhelmed, bewildered. I would just try and give in for a while and say: 'I've been ill, but I shall get stronger every day, and learn to do things by degrees. I can't expect to do everything at once. At first I shall only be able to walk across the room, but day by day I shall do more and more. I must be gradual, patient. There will be prides and exultations in learning to do things differently. I must learn to see with the eyes of my inner self.' "

He put out a hand.

"That's wonderful, just what I needed. Inward eyes. Of course, one's mental life can go on."

He had been listening to her voice as much as to her words, for it was her voice that first made him understand that beauty can manifest itself in lineaments of sound.

"May I touch your hand?"

She placed her hand beside his.

"I'm beginning to realize. Hearing and touch and the smell of things. Other windows, even if one is closed. Is that the hand that writes the books?"

"Yes."

"Different. Soft and sensitive. But forgive me, I am being silly. Yet, I can't help wanting to grope. It makes me feel that I'm not shut in by a kind of cave wall."

His fingers were like the fingers of an infant but she divined the innocence of their movements.

"Even people who can see live so much in caves, my dear. There need be no cave."

"I'm not so frightened now. People will help me, won't they?"

"Of course."

III

In the night she was disturbed by some sound, and sitting up in bed she turned on the light, and sat listening.

The sound of something falling! Instantly she was out of bed and hurrying into her dressing-gown. He had asked her that no one should sit up on his account, and had assured her that he was going to sleep like a child. Surely he had given them sufficient trouble?

When she opened his door and turned on the light she saw a sight which was to be unforgettable. He was on his knees beside the bed, groping with one hand for objects on the floor. What had happened was obvious. He had got out of bed, blundered against the table that stood beside it and knocked the thing over.

"Oh, my dear, what are you doing? With that arm, too."

But he had recovered something, a vase into which the wallflowers had been put.

"So sorry, Miss Gerard. Do be careful. There must be some broken glass."

She stood spellbound for a moment watching him trying to place the vase upon the bed.

"It's not broken, is it? So damned clumsy of me. And I've woken you up."

She was deeply moved, and more than moved, for behind those blind gropings she divined the courage of purpose. She swept across the room and gently took the vase from him.

"You haven't hurt yourself?"

"No. I didn't take a toss, only the poor old table. Have I broken anything?"

"Only the feeding-cup. It doesn't matter. I'll soon put things right."

"I'm awfully sorry. You see, I had to——"

She understood even what he was too shy to tell her.

"Did you manage?"

"Yes."

"Now, get back into bed, dear. I'll put everything straight. It's a good thing you had that arm in a sling."

She helped him back into bed, and picked up the overturned table and the debris.

"My first lesson, Miss Gerard. One's got to learn where the furniture is and not to knock things over."

She was putting the flowers back into the vase. They would need fresh water.

"That's rather great of you, Walter."

"Great?"

"Yes, no doubt about it. Wait, you want covering up properly. The quilt's all crooked."

She was pulling the quilt straight when he asked her that question.

"I wonder if you would mind not calling me Walter?"

"Why, dear?"

"It's such a damned silly name. Old Cash would turn it into Wal. I've got another name."

"What is it?"

"Clive."

"I like that better."

"It's not so good as yours."

"Rosamund," and she gave a little laugh; "so flowery."

"I think it's just right."

"Well, you can use it if you care to."

"May I?"

"Yes."

"Thanks awfully. I say, do forgive me for waking you

up. I'll be more careful in the future. But, of course, to-morrow you'll be rid of me."

"I haven't thought of it as a release."

"Haven't you? It's awfully nice of you to say that. But you will come and see me?"

"Of course."

"I shall—— Well, never mind. Please go back to bed. I'm quite all right now."

"Good night, Clive."

She was by the door when she heard him say: "Good night, Rosamund."

VIII

THERE had been many occasions in her life when she had longed to die, just to go to sleep and never to wake up, but sometimes there had been anger in her revolt against the business of living. She had felt fierce towards her own wretched body. She could have slashed it, defaced it, let it fall and destroy itself on the rocks at the foot of the cliff. She could remember one night when she had felt bitter and lonely and futile, and she had unlocked the little safe she kept in her bedroom and taken out a box in which she had secreted a tube of white powder. Deliberately she had dissolved some of it, and placing the glass on the table beside her bed, she had covered herself with the quilt and reached out her hand for the glass.

Something had failed in her. Or was it that some part of her had refused to acknowledge that such an escape was anything but cowardly. She could remember getting up, and going down the passage and emptying the glass. But the little hoard of white powder still lived in her safe. She liked to be able to tell herself that it was there, and to know that instant death was always possible.

Heberden had come up to tell her that the operation had been successfully performed and that all was well.

"Steel is quite satisfied. The excision was inevitable. The pathetic thing is that he won't be disfigured."

"Only the eyes?"

"Yes, a house with the blinds down. I saw him before he went into the anæsthetist's room. He asked me to give you a message."

"Yes?"

"Tell Miss Gerard that I shall never forget and ask her not to forget."

"Poor lad, he was very brave about it."

"Yes, a nice lad. The real problem of life is only beginning for him. You'll go and see him?"

"Do you think it will help?"

"More than you know."

He had left her to one of those moods of bitter self depreciation. These emotional storms were too harrowing. She was afraid of life, and the adventure of feeling and caring and losing. She had shrunk from the big and burning issues because she had been so sure that she would have emerged scorched and ridiculous. She had put these pangs and despairs into her books, for it can be so much easier to write about life than to live it. In your quiet and secret cell, emotion did not rush in and mock you like some little giggling wench to whom sex was as easy as sucking an orange.

She said to herself: "It is much better that I should not see him. Let it end like this."

Also she found herself saying: "Someone will tell him that you are repulsively disfigured, and that you look nearer forty than thirty. What idiotic dream is this? That any man should need you. Surely you have conquered such crudities?"

No, she would not go. She would write him a kind and friendly letter and confess that she was not as other women, that she was odd, almost morbidly separative.

But someone, a nurse, some anonymous stranger, would be obliged to read that letter to him!

She would have broken her promise.

Yes, but in a week or a month he would have forgotten both her and her promise.

Inevitably there was a part of her that resented all this distracting emotion. She was like a woman who did not wish to have children, and was finding life trying to force one upon her, and to thrust into her creative and mental world a little raw, exacting egoist. She had

escaped from the mere elementals, planted them out, erected her walls and her hedges. Lonely she might be at times, but she knew just how lonely her own self could be, and how work gave her escape and expression. She loved her work. There were many days in the year when she was completely and blessedly absorbed in it.

A telegram from Margaret. It arrived just as she was sitting down to lunch.

"Can I come for the week-end. M."

Oh, happy intervention! It meant that Margaret would be with her on Saturday. The boy was sent off with her whole-hearted yes, and Jane was told to prepare for her mistress's friend. "I'll get the room ready myself, Jane. Do you think you can manage after all the trouble you have had?" Jane's answer was that Miss Hayle was never any trouble; she did everybody good, especially mooning Mary.

"Besides, she's so lovely to look at."

Miss Gerard winced. She had never been jealous of Margaret. It would have been just as ridiculous to feel jealous of a cherry-tree in full blossom. Margaret's loveliness transcended sex; it was so complete and unadvertised and exquisite. And Margaret was interested in impersonal things, life's disharmonies and the assuaging of discords and pains. Moreover, in spite of her passion to better things, Margaret had such a lovely sense of fun.

Jane would have said that Miss Hayle was good for Miss Gerard. She took her out of herself, away from her books, and made her talk like a live woman. She even made Miss Gerard laugh, and laughter is good for lonely people.

Miss Gerard joined Will in the garden.

"Miss Hayle's coming, Will."

Which meant that the garden was to be as good as it

could be, grass cut, edges trimmed, the vases full of flowers, and the old coach-house cleared of all encumbrance to accept Miss Hayle's small car.

"Will you be picking the flowers, miss?"

"Yes, Will."

"There be some jonquils and polyanthus left in t'orchard. Smell sweet, they do. I might get a few head of 'sparagus. Six a piece."

"Six each. Splendid."

She felt herself soothed and reassured by the near presence of her friend. She could put her own personal problem away, and give herself to a comradeship that was made up of pure understanding and affection. Margaret made her feel serene, and perhaps a little proud of friendship with a woman whose texture was so exquisite both in temperament and in the flesh. Margaret could laugh at her own looks. "My dear, I believe I actually frighten men," which was true. Most of the poor trouser-proud creatures found her so inexorably flawless.

Miss Gerard prayed for fine weather. Saturday opened with quiet and grey eyes. It was not one of your flashing, fascinating vamps of a morning. By ten o'clock the sun would be out and the sky cloudless. So said old Will. Miss Gerard's gardener still believed in a dim and distant sort of deity, and in the secrecy of his gardener's soul he said terse things about that malicious old gentleman, for it was obvious to any gardener that God must be full of mischief and malice.

Sunlight on the grass and the flowers, and the apple blossom out in patches to take the place of the pear that was falling. The firs on the hill playing softly upon golden lyres. Margaret would be at Knoll Farm for tea, and tea could be set in the loggia.

"It really is going to be fine, Will."

Yet Miss Gerard was not quite happy with herself, in spite of her conviction that she was being so supremely sane. The parlour had resumed its ordered and pleasant beauty, lacquered cabinet and walnut chairs and bureau

occupying their accustomed places, but she could not forget its temporary tenant, and his tears and that overturned table. Might there not be moments when sanity, or what passed for sanity, was the mere solacing of self? And what a platitude! Jane had failed to replace one of the Persian rugs just where Miss Gerard liked it to be, and she was rearranging it when Jane came down the passage.

"The telephone, miss."

"Not Miss Hayle?"

"No, miss, the hospital."

Miss Gerard put a hand to the disfigured cheek, a habit of hers when she was bothered.

"You might take the message, Jane. Who is it speaking?"

"The Sister, miss. She asked to speak to you."

"Oh, very well."

Miss Gerard went to the telephone with her hand still laid against her cheek. She was conscious of accusing herself of cowardice, and of being irritated by the inward voice. The hand that had screened her cheek picked up the receiver.

"Hallo."

"Is that Knoll Farm?"

"Yes, Miss Gerard speaking."

"Oh, Miss Gerard, I hope you will forgive me."

"Who is that?"

"Sister Brown. I wanted to speak to you about Mr. Strange."

"Oh, yes, of course. How is Mr. Strange?"

"Being rather difficult, Miss Gerard. That's why I have rung up. We have him in a private ward. He's most terribly depressed. He keeps asking——"

"Yes."

"When you are coming to see him."

There was a pause, and then Miss Gerard's voice suggested both hesitation and haste.

"Oh, yes, I said I would. But I have had a lot of urgent work, and I have a friend here for the week-end.

Yes, perhaps I might manage to come on Monday. I'll ring you up. Please give Mr. Strange my best wishes. Yes, I quite understand that it must be—— Quite so, Sister. Try and explain to him."

"May I tell him you will come on Monday, Miss Gerard?"

"Oh, yes, I'll try to, if my friend has gone. Good morning, Sister. Thank you for ringing up."

"Do try and come, Miss Gerard. I believe it will help him. You see, he is suffering now from the mental shock."

"I'm so sorry. Yes, I'll try to come. Good morning, Sister."

11

She came away from the telephone feeling hurt and agitated. An interfering and persistent person that Sister! And for the last ten years Miss Gerard had been eliminating all interference, and being a celebrity and unusual she considered that she had a right to resent it. The artist must be allowed a certain ruthlessness, for the inspiration that possesses the creative mind can be ruthless. She had said: "Nothing must be allowed to interfere with my work," and all impertinent intrusions had been castigated.

And here was this emotional situation demanding some solution. She knew that she had given way to more emotion than was good for her and her work, and the creative self had rebelled. It bade her shut doors and be ruthless, intelligently ruthless, and pass a cool, cold hand over those scribbles on the slate. Let them be ignored and effaced. Such a solution would be more merciful to both parties.

But what of her promise to go and see him? Was she not hiding behind her craft, and pretending that in order to protect it she was justified in being pitiless? Was that her real reason? When she examined herself

with an artist's sincerity was not the ultimate cause selfish, shrinking fear? Socially, her disfigured face had made her a coward. She was afraid to take her sore and secret self-love to the hospital and exhibit it to those other women, and to come away knowing that one of them would say to him: "What a pity Miss Gerard has that mark on her face. Such bad luck. She might have been quite a good-looking woman."

Yes, that was her real reason for wishing to break her promise, and with a spasm of shame and of bitterness she admitted it. Her self-love was stronger than her compassion.

She went up to her high place among the firs, and sitting down at the foot of a tree confessed herself to the impersonal sea and sky. She was not capable of caring for any human creature as she cared for herself. Was that the rather humiliating truth? Had she not preached courage and compassion in her books, and when life put her to the supreme test she played the coward.

Should she tell Margaret, ask Margaret to judge? Margaret would understand; Margaret had a lucid and impartial outlook; Margaret was wise to the woman's point of view, and an idealist with regard to woman's work. Why should the woman always surrender, leave her brush or her pen or her piano to play the mother or wet-nurse to some fool man? Why should it be assumed that woman's work did not matter, when primitive male sentiment became rhetorical about birthrights and babies? Had not she and Margaret talked the social superstition to threads, and burned the vestiges on the vestal fire?

Yes, she would appeal to Margaret. She would say: "You understand me. My work's so sensitive and delicately balanced. The least thing puts it out of temper. It may sound absurd, but even a worrying letter is like so much grit in my consciousness. One has to be so calm and aloof and impersonal. One dreads all emotional exactions. One resents their intrusion into one's life."

The locked gates were open for Margaret, and Miss Gerard sat in the garden and listened for her friend's car. Margaret would arrive looking serene and cool and lovely, even after seventy miles on a road that was infested by all the week-end cads and crocks. She would smile and say: "Hallo, my dear, your week-end rush to the sea becomes more and more Gadara," and would slip out of the green sheath of her speed-model and kiss Miss Gerard with lips that were firm and fresh. And that was just how it happened, save that Margaret's front off-wing showed the scars of battle, and her brown eyes had a brittle brightness.

"Sorry. Afraid I'm late. I had a little clash the other side of Helsham."

"Your mudguard."

"Exactly. A fellow cut in on me and then tried to get away with it."

"And didn't?"

"No. I caught him, and made him stop. It's one's duty to be a little candid to nasty people."

The car was put away in the coach-house, and Margaret and her suit-case shepherded to the room whose window overlooked the orchard. "Tea in the loggia, dear." Margaret was at the window, taking off her hat and contemplating the apple blossom and the white narcissi in the very green grass. "My dear, how silly of one to be peeved by a cad in a car!" Miss Gerard left her friend at the window, and went down to tell Jane to make the tea. Prince was waiting for her at the foot of the stairs and the dog's eyes were gentle.

Miss Gerard bent down and kissed the top of his head.

"Teach me not to be jealous, Prince. Gods and dogs are supposed to be jealous people, and sometimes you shame me."

For in contemplating her friend's perfect profile Miss Gerard had been conscious of a sudden pang. Nature had given Margaret so much. But was she jealous of

her friend? Surely the reaction was not so trivial and crude as the emotion she had experienced? No, Margaret's loveliness made her a little sad, and more conscious of her own disfigurement. Margaret had nothing to fear from the eyes and tongues of other men and women.

"Tea, Jane?"

"Yes, miss."

Jane had put out the blue Spode tea-service. Jane had produced hot buttered scones. She and Miss Hayle met in the passage and Miss Gerard heard their two voices.

"How are you, Jane?"

"The better for seeing you, miss."

"Then it's mutual. I always feel all smoothed out here, no creases."

Jane crumpled up her face at Margaret.

"I shouldn't have thought, miss, you ever had any creases."

"Oh, haven't I! But you and Miss Gerard iron them out."

It was the serene friend who sat down in a basket-chair and snuggled into the cushions, and looked at Miss Gerard and the Spode china and the garden with eyes of affection. But Margaret was not a person whose eyes dwelt only on surfaces; her glances touched things, explored them and their inwardness. There was no blemish anywhere in this sweet and secret place, with the cuckoo calling and the whole world in flower. Nor was Margaret conscious of her friend's disfigurement. It had become for her like some trivial stigma, a mere shadow lying across the cheek of an exquisite friendship, a thread that had woven itself into the texture of this other personality and become familiar and almost unobserved.

How was the new book going? Miss Gerard, having poured out the tea, sat with her hand laid along her cheek. Why had Margaret asked that question? Margaret

was not an asker of questions, especially such direct ones, but Miss Gerard had never watched her friend disentangling a difficult case, distracting a patient's attention by asking questions while her own hands and eyes were busy.

"I'm rather stuck for the moment."

"Some character being peevish?"

Miss Gerard made her decision.

"No. We have been a little upset here. An unexpected visitor."

So something had happened to explain why Rosamund was not herself. Voices can be so significant, and Miss Gerard's voice seemed to be pitched a tone higher than usual, as though some string in her was under tension.

"Dear old Biederman?"

"Much more sensational. An aeroplane crashed in the fog just over the hill, and we had the pilot on our hands for several days."

Miss Hayle's lashes flickered. She realized that she was looking too intently and curiously at her friend's face.

"Was he badly hurt?"

"Yes. They thought it a hopeless case. I wanted to tell you about it. He is going to recover. They moved him into Westbourn hospital for an operation."

"Successful?"

"Yes. It was for his eyes. He is going to be blind."

Miss Hayle reached for the cigarette-box and helped herself.

"Jane's scones need repose. Was there no hope of saving his sight?"

"None."

"Quite a youngster?"

"Oh, about twenty-five, I suppose. I may as well be candid about it. The thing upset me. I had to tell him that he was going to be blind. All rather harrowing and tragic."

"I've had blind children, my dear. It's much harder to be blind when you have known what sight is. But why did you have to tell him?"

"It seemed that it might come easier from me."

"For him?"

"I suppose so. And it was so unlike anything in a book. I'm used to my emotion in books."

Miss Hayle sat smoking and looking at the sunlight on a bed of tulips. Miss Gerard was lighting a cigarette, and the flame of the match seemed to gather a slight tremor from Miss Gerard's fingers.

"If you don't want to tell me any more I shall understand."

Miss Gerard turned her face away.

"But I do. I'm bothered. You may as well have the whole of the analysis. I promised to go and see him. And I don't want to."

"Interference."

"Yes. One may have experiences that readjust one's sense of value. One's work is the most exacting thing in one's life, work like mine and yours. It's far more jealous than a man. Then, there is the assumption——"

"That a man child has only to whimper and woman must leave everything and rush to comfort him."

"Yes, and the silly creature does."

"Well, don't go, my dear. Where is the obligation?"

"A promise to go. Besides, the hospital rang up yesterday."

"For hospital interpolate Matron, Sister, or Nurse."

"It was the Sister-in-charge. Would I come and see him. He was dreadfully depressed and difficult, and was asking for me."

Miss Hayle was looking very grave. Possibly she had begun to divine the profundities of her friend's crisis, and that an intelligent egoism could not fish in such deep waters.

"I'm feeling rather shy, Munda. One's never quite so casual and cynical as one sounds."

"Is that how I sound?"

"You know, one gets painfully sensitive in one's doctoring. People have to tell one everything and sometimes one feels——"

Miss Gerard made a sudden movement in her chair.

"Margaret, you have me. Be merciful to me, my dear. I'm being an awful humbug."

"My dear!"

"Let's have the shameful thing out in the light. It's my wretched face. He has never seen it. And somehow I don't want him ever to know. You see, some kind person will be sure to tell him. One's damned self-love! I knew I loved myself, but not so badly as that."

Margaret sat forward in her chair. Her face had a sudden softness. She put her cigarette aside and, rising, bent over her friend and kissed her.

"Doesn't it occur to you that some of us never notice it? Why should anybody tell him? Besides, do you think that it would matter?"

"I have been such a coward, always."

"Hardly that, my dear. Tell me, but for that, would you go?"

"Yes."

Margaret bent down again and kissed the crown of her friend's head.

"Well, I should go."

IX

IF Miss Gerard's moods fluctuated, so did the temper of the English spring. The forecast might be fair, and April sending her children to bed with treacherous kisses, but she woke them next morning with a north-east wind and a sky of grey and dirty flannel. Miss Gerard, waking rather like a child on her birthday morning, yet full of secret fearfulness and strange tremors, saw the dead blind and felt winter in the room. Why, when one decided to let out the furnace and dispense with the radiators, did this thing always happen? She rose, went to the window and drew up the blind. The illusion of spring had vanished in the night. It was a grim and dastardly day, with the young leaves shivering and the tulips heads down, blossom blowing from the trees.

She went shivering back to bed. Poor Margaret, poor Rosamund! Her mood swung round to match this depressing day. It had been arranged that Margaret should drive her into Westbourn, but again she was shrinking from her crisis. She lay and listened to the north-east wind making a melancholy soughing in the chimney. Did women with children to care for and floors to scrub pay much attention to the weather?

Jane brought in her early morning tea. She was glad that Jane had brought it, and not Mary Spray.

"What a beast of a day, Jane."

"Oh, just April, miss."

"I wish we hadn't let out the furnace."

"Will's lighting it, miss."

"Splendid. Will you tell Miss Hayle that the bath is hers."

"I think she's in it, miss."

Miss Gerard drank her tea and, feeling better for it, was encouraged to call herself a very selfish woman. She could lie in bed and whimper while other people worked in order that her world might be warm and smooth and comfortable. What did she do for other people but write books for them to read? And that was her own pleasure. It was not a mere question of ethics but of elementary ecology, the case of the protected and too sensitive plant pampered in a conservatory. Conservatory! Horrid word! Why feel afraid of a north-east wind, and lose your courage because April was being April?

She got out of bed and went to her mirror. She was conscious of compelling herself to look at her reflection in the mirror. How she hated her own face! But was not that because she loved herself too well?

Sudden sunlight shining on the Scotch firs and the green hill. She looked out of her window like a surprised child. So the day was not to be so grey and dismal as she had feared. Bright intervals. And then she heard the voice of her friend.

"Munda, hallo!"

"Hallo, out already?"

"Just going to see that none of my tyres are flat."

"I'm sorry it's such a beast of a day."

"Oh, it's not so bad as that. Have I time to run down to the sea before breakfast?"

"Plenty."

"Right ho."

Miss Gerard brought with her into the breakfast-room a sweet perfume that was not of the English spring. It floated to Miss Hayle and pleased her, so much so that its exotic flavour had for her an esoteric meaning. Her friend was wearing a pretty jade-blue frock, and the hands that floated over the cups were rather like fluttering birds. Margaret Hayle had a feeling that Rosamund

Gerard was emotionally agitated, and that the scent she had used was intended to be delicately and significantly personal.

"You're smelling sweet, my dear. What is it?"

"Barbara Gould, Numéro Quarante."

"Very pleasant after iodoform."

"I don't reek, Margaret, do I?"

"Of course not. Shall I share out the buttered eggs?"

"Please."

"What sort of time would you like the car?"

"Won't it bore you?"

"No. Do you think we can crowd Prince in?"

"He's rather large."

"You can share the whole back seat with him."

"Will they admit visitors on a Sunday morning?"

"'Phone the Sister and tell her you are coming."

Miss Gerard had forgotten to sugar the tea.

"How silly of me. Will eleven suit you?"

"Twenty minutes in, half an hour there, and back for lunch. I do like my Sunday laze after lunch."

"That's understood."

Miss Gerard's restlessness was only too evident. She sat down after breakfast to smoke a cigarette, but leaving half of it unsmoked she entered the house for a basket and scissors. Miss Hayle, watching her friend snipping wallflowers and laying them in her basket, divined both the spiritual and sensuous meaning of Miss Gerard's use of the world's sweet savours. Narcissi were added to the wallflowers, but for these white flowers Miss Gerard wandered off into the orchard where she was beyond the gaze of Margaret's brown eyes, and Miss Hayle, left alone with her own reflections, for Prince had gone off with his mistress, confronted a woman's problem. Supposing——? But was not the situation as delicate as perfume Numéro Quarante, and so intimately her friend's that any exploration of it seemed rather like prying into some other woman's love letters. And yet Margaret

could not help wondering whether the very sensitive world in which Miss Gerard lived was not too fine and ethereal for experiments in sex.

II

The County Hospital at Westbourn was like Westbourn itself, very red and hygienic and new. Westbourn was a modern growth, or rather a town without traditions which had been perpetuated by the propertied classes, and whose spacious sea-front was completely a parade. Miss Gerard had described Westbourn as "An experiment in Segregated Gentility." Such places, with their hundreds of red villas and little gardens, and oak fences, clean streets and white lamp-posts were to her both depressing and terrifying. There was no shabby, jocund, old town smelling of tar and fish and the salt sea.

Miss Gerard, sitting beside her friend in the sports coupé, saw Westbourn on that Sunday morning as a conglomeration of red roofs like a sore spot on the coast's profile. The sea was very blue and seamed with white horses. Church bells were ringing. The north-east wind strode over this centre of segregated gentility like an impatient giant who hurried to wet his great feet in the sea.

"It looks just particularly horrible this morning," said Miss Gerard.

Margaret Hayle was conscious of her friend's tension. She was sitting beside her as though this was her first drive in a car, and the balance of it had to be preserved. Her knees were pressed together, her hands locked in her lap.

"Infinitely respectable, my dear. A place in which dustbins are not mentioned. But the sea's almost Mediterranean."

"Strange creature, man."

"He creates a livid splodge and calls it culture."

Instinctively Miss Gerard's left hand went to her cheek. It was as though Westbourn made her conscious of her own disfigurement, and caused her to shrink the more from a town whose stare might be so self-complacent and uncomprehending. Miss Hayle happened to know the County Hospital, having once visited a sick child there, and she drove along the sea-front to Victoria Gardens. A statue of the great queen stood here, looking starily seaward and evidently not amused. The hospital had been built on the crown of a hill and overlooking Victoria Gardens, and it was approached by a broad sweep of tarmac. A notice said: "Visitors' cars park here." Miss Hayle backed her coupé skilfully between two other cars and switched off the engine, but Miss Gerard was still sitting with her knees pressed together and her hands locked in her lap.

"Come in with me, Margaret."

Miss Gerard seemed unable to make up her mind to leave the car, and her friend, leaning across and opening the near door, was moved by this other woman's irresolution.

"Why be afraid of being kind, my dear?"

Miss Gerard's eyelids flickered.

"Thank you, Margaret. I needed that."

"The flowers, Munda."

Miss Gerard was forgetting her flowers. She smiled faintly at her friend, and said, "How silly of me," and turning to confront that large red building she seemed to stand hesitant and mute like a shy creature overwhelmed by some public occasion.

"I shan't be long."

"I'll stroll down and look at the sea."

Miss Gerard was speaking to a porter in the vestibule.

"Good morning. My name is Gerard. I've come to see a patient."

"I'm sorry, madam, it's not visiting time."

He had stared for a moment at her face.

"Sister Brown expects me. I rang her up."

"Then, it's all right, madam. Edward Ward. First floor. Along the corridor to the right and up the stairs."

She passed along the corridor with its high, bright windows. There seemed so much light here, too much light; and need the man have stared at her in that particular way when she was feeling so acutely conscious of her face? At the foot of the stairs her courage came near to failing her. She paused on the first step, clutching her flowers and wishing that Margaret were with her. Strange eyes might have been attracted by Margaret's face, and she would have felt reassured and put in countenance by Margaret's beauty. "See, I have a friend who is lovely. It does not matter to her that I am such a freak."

She put the flowers to her face, and drawing courage and some elemental comfort from them, she began to climb the stairs, and half-way up she was aware of a woman hurrying down, a big creature in a blue uniform, a woman with a large, plain, pleasant face.

"Miss Gerard?"

"Yes."

"I'm Sister Brown. The porter gave me a ring."

This woman's eyes were kind. They looked down at Miss Gerard's face as though they saw nothing there that was abnormal. She put out a hand and touched the flowers.

"How lovely! It is good of you to come. Mr. Strange expects you."

She turned and walked with Miss Gerard up the stairs.

"You know, it is really quite wonderful, Miss Gerard, your coming to see us. I imagine you get sick of hearing about your books."

Miss Gerard's face was faintly flushed.

"Oh, I don't know."

"Your books have meant quite a lot to me. Yes, really they have. You do so understand. It must be great to be able to help people."

Miss Gerard's eyes looked round into the other woman's face.

"So do you, Sister. And perhaps you understand why I may understand."

Sister Brown was thinking to herself "Yes, your poor face. What hard luck!" and since even the most practical of women can be romanticists, Sister Brown was suddenly discovering unexpected subtleties in the situation. Her mental picture of the celebrated Douglas Gerard had been that of a mature and middle-aged woman, a little dowdy perhaps, but jocund and self-assured, and Miss Gerard was almost a girl and as shy as some gentle old lady.

"I think I ought to tell you one or two things about Mr. Strange."

"Yes, Sister."

"Come into my room."

There was one arm-chair in the Sister's room, and beside it a lacquer table, and on this table Miss Gerard saw three little books. Such books came to her often through the post and she recognized the genus. Sister Brown, planting herself upon the bed, saw and smiled.

"Yes, autograph books. Would you mind? Three of our nurses. You can use my pen."

Miss Gerard was feeling comforted. She had expected strange and unfriendly faces, and was finding herself among friends.

"I'm afraid my signature is rather a scrawl."

"I expect you have to do so much writing. Do you really write all your books by hand?"

"Yes."

"And they are in Braille too?"

"Most of them."

"Mr. Strange was asking. You won't think it crude of me, Miss Gerard, but he is terribly grateful to you."

Miss Gerard was scribbling her name on a pink page.

"Really, I did very little. It seemed such a tragic thing. One just did what one could. And he has been very——?"

"Terribly depressed. What seems to worry him most, Miss Gerard, is the future."

"Yes, I can understand."

"What I mean is he seems to have a horror of being helpless and dependent upon other people."

"A question of pride?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. If you could suggest something, insist on him realizing that he need not be a parasite."

"Parasite?"

"That's the word he is always using. People are so different, you know, in their make-up. I have had men in my wards who would be content to lie there and be waited on for the rest of their lives. But this lad is so horribly sensitive about giving trouble."

Miss Gerard had signed the last book. She placed it and the pen on the lacquer table.

"That's how one would like him to be. Does that sound terribly priggish, Sister?"

The big woman smiled at her.

"I don't think you could be priggish, Miss Gerard."

III

The man in the bed heard a door opening and a voice saying, "Miss Gerard, Mr. Strange."

They had put him in a private room, a little, oblong white box whose window seemed to fill the whole of one wall. There was just room for the bed, the bed-table and two chairs. Sunlight was pouring in. The red coverlet on the bed contrasted with the white austerity of this cell.

Miss Gerard sat down beside the bed with her back to the very bright window. Sister Brown had closed the door and for some seconds there was silence, and so intimate and urgent was this silence that it seemed to paralyse Miss Gerard's lips. She sat contemplating his fair hair and lightly bandaged face, and her voicelessness was as complete as his blindness.

Nor during those first moments could he find anything to say to her. He, too, seemed paralysed by the poignancy of her presence. She was not even sound to him as yet, only a drift of sweet perfume like some pale flower scenting the night. And then his right hand made a movement and came to lie palm upwards in the hollow of his splintered arm.

"Are you really there?"

Her response was a sudden, shy and almost austere bending towards the bed. She placed the flowers in the upturned hand.

"I brought you these."

He put the flowers to his face.

"Wallflowers and something else. Out of your garden?"

"Yes. Wallflowers and narcissi."

He laid the flowers on the bed and his hand returned to the same position. He wanted her to hold that hand, to feel the consoling, satisfying touch of her fingers. She was a voice to him, and a strange sweet perfume that was other than the scent of the flowers, but his sensitiveness was as shy and inarticulate as hers, for what right had he to exact anything or to count upon her compassion?

"They are being awfully kind to me here."

"I'm glad. Sister Brown seems a dear."

"Oh, yes, she's a good sort. They are all great admirers of yours."

"That's very nice of them."

Again there was silence. She was looking at his fair hair and finding the texture of it delicate and fine. She could see his mouth and nostrils, and they were of the same quality as his hair. She could not find the right words to describe them. Her glance shifted to his hand; the blue and white pyjama sleeve had slipped half-way up his forearm, and the skin was soft and almost feminine.

"How's the arm?"

"Oh, quite comfortable."

The fingers of that hand were making little restless

movements, a kind of mute and subconscious appeal to this invisible presence.

"I've been so longing for you to come."

She watched the movement of his lips, and saw them stiffen into a kind of frightened silence, and suddenly she understood. She was conscious of an emotional spasm that was almost pain. He was afraid, as fearful as she was of the impulse that had forced those words from him, and instantly she knew that he was waiting, listening. The answering touch was inevitably and urgently hers.

Her hand went out and touched his. "Yes, Clive," and she felt his fingers fold themselves over hers. He lay silently, with his blind face turned towards her.

"Do you mind? Just for a little while?"

"Why should I mind, dear?"

"Oh, well, it just helps me, and it can't hurt you."

She sat holding his hand, and feeling that something in herself that had long been secret and hidden and afraid was being compelled to rise as from the dead, and come forth into the light.

"Have you been very frightened, dear?"

"I'm afraid I have."

"Tell me."

"I don't want to make a song about myself."

"It is the future that frightens you?"

"Have you ever lain awake at night before an exam and felt that you are bound to fail? Or those nights when all the rotten and futile things in yourself seem to come and sit beside your bed?"

"I think I know."

"But how could you ever feel like that?"

"My dear, my soul has often gone begging its bread. There are times when one hates and despises one's wretched ineffectual self."

"You, feeling like that?"

"Oh, yes."

"But how is it possible? You who have made such a success of life."

"My dear, in some ways I'm a dreadful failure."

He seemed to turn slightly in the bed.

"You, a failure! No, that doesn't seem possible to me. Anyone with a voice like yours, anyone who can understand as you do."

"In some ways I have been a very selfish woman, my dear."

"I don't believe it. You have given so much to people in your books."

She was not conscious of her head bending with a kind of passionate humility over their clasped hands.

"Why talk about me? It is your future——"

"May I tell you?"

"Of course."

"I'm so horribly afraid of self-pity, of becoming a sort of parasite, a slimy thing that lives in the dark. Something inside me keeps saying: 'You must do something, do something.' You see, one's got to feel necessary, a person, a part of things, or go mad. It's the prospect of sitting alone in a dark corner like an idiot child that frightens me. I know that in a way I have to begin all over again, learn things, teach myself, but it's the idea of being alone in a dark corner——"

She bent down and put her lips to the bandages over his forehead.

"I understand."

He lay very still for a moment as though the touch of her lips in his dark world had come as some profound and mysterious revelation.

"Did you really kiss me?"

"Yes, my dear. I'm sorry, I——"

"Sorry! Yes, I know, I must seem a rather pitiful thing. I——"

"Not pitiful, my dear, rather splendid. I would be so very proud if you would let me try to help you a little."

She was conscious of the pressure of his fingers.

"Is that really true? Something to hold to, you, even

if it is only now and again? I—I promise you I won't be greedy, I won't ask you—— Just now and again."

"Yes, dear."

"I can't believe it."

"You may."

"It's very wonderful."

Before she had realized what he was doing he had drawn her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers.

"If I could see you just once a week. How one clings to a habit of speech! I can't see you, but I can listen and feel."

There were other reasons why Miss Gerard was glad that he could not see her face.

"Once a week, yes, Clive. And now I must go, my dear. A friend drove me in and she is waiting. Try not to feel afraid of the future."

He let her hand go.

"I'm not so afraid now."

She found herself in the corridor at the head of the stairs. They were empty and she was glad. She was not conscious of descending the stairs, or of the high windows and the glare of light upon the white walls and her face. Dr. Margaret Hayle, sitting waiting in the car, saw her friend appear on the hospital steps. Miss Gerard seemed to hesitate for a moment like some creature emerging from some dim place into a brilliant and almost bewildering atmosphere. Miss Hayle had a map on her knee; she had been studying it, and she made a pretence of being absorbed in her map.

"Sorry I have been so long, Margaret."

Miss Hayle, glancing at her friend's face, discovered upon it a kind of inward sheen.

"Hallo. Just been looking at the map. I thought we might run over to Bodiam this afternoon."

Miss Gerard got into the car, and Dr. Hayle folded up the map and slipped it into a door-pocket.

"How do you feel about Bodiam?"

"I should love to go."

"After tea, perhaps. Or we could get tea somewhere."

"Yes."

Miss Hayle started the engine. She had more than a feeling that her friend did not wish to be looked at too closely, and that intimate questions would be both tactless and unnecessary, for Miss Gerard had the air of a woman who was carrying some precious liquid in a fragile bowl and no drop of it was to be spilled.

X

THERE were many people who would have been ready to warn Miss Gerard that she was in danger of behaving like a sentimental fool, and that when your cultured spinster becomes emotional she can be the silliest of creatures, but Miss Gerard was not quite the old maid her sisters thought her. The vulgar world might laugh and say: "She's never had a lover or a child, and with a face like that she'd only be kissed in the dark." In fact, Phœbe Prodgers was to refer to Rosamund's romance with a candour and a coarseness that suffered from no illusions.

"She had to catch a blind one, my dear!"

Bodiam was looking very black on this April day, and the moat was no magic mirror, and if Dr. Margaret Hayle was fond of saying that you could never be sure how people would react to normal stimuli, she too might have been as talkative as the jackdaws who dwelt in Bodiam Castle. But it was an occasion when you said just nothing or next to nothing, for there were profundities that were like the wind and the water. The setting sun was making an effort to shine upon the grey black walls and the ruffled steel of the moat. They had climbed one of the towers, and Miss Gerard standing by the battlements and looking out across the green valley of the Rother, made that most surprising confession.

"Margaret, I am going to adopt a child."

Her friend refrained from the obvious question. What child? And Miss Gerard was grateful.

"Don't ask me anything for a moment. I am being the conventional humbug, and yet not completely so. One may know that one is doing a thing wilfully."

Miss Hayle looked at her with troubled affection.